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# The Experience of Peer Mentors Within a Peer Mentor Postsecondary Transition Program

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THE EXPERIENCE OF PEER MENTORS WITHIN A PEER MENTOR  
POSTSECONDARY TRANSITION PROGRAM

by

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An Independent Study

Submitted to the Occupational Therapy Department

of the

University of North Dakota

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Occupational Therapy

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2017

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This Independent Study, submitted by Carissa Birchem, MOTS and Mikayla Greely, MOTS in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Occupational Therapy from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisor under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

*Sarah Nielsen, PhD, OTR/L (electronic signature)*

Signature of Faculty Advisor

4/20/17

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## **ABSTRACT**

Peer mentorship programs are one approach to assist students with disabilities to be more successful within a college community. One such program is the Student Organization for Accessibility and Resources (SOAR) which focuses on the occupations of education, social participation, and leisure activities in conjunction with assisting students in identifying available resources. However, there is limited understanding regarding these types of programs. The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the student peer mentor's overall experience, how the environment affected their experience, and the occupation of peer mentorship. Researchers utilized a phenomenological qualitative research method completing six participant interviews. Findings concluded that the peer mentor's experience was impacted by engagement in personal preparation, meaningful occupations, employment of the therapeutic relationship, and viewing the mentee holistically. Peer mentors developed professional skills as they navigated challenges. Role navigation was initially difficult when engaging in the occupation of a peer mentor. The physical and social environments facilitated the peer mentorship process; however, mentors would prefer more formal orientation processes. Peer mentorship programs did have a positive impact on the development of student occupational therapists and should continue program refinement with the following recommendations: a) the orientation process, b) marketing the SOAR program, and c) providing interpersonal strategies for mentors.

**Key words:** students with disabilities, peer mentorship program, peer mentor,  
postsecondary education

## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Anticipated transitions are numerous life events that occur naturally throughout one's lifespan at various time periods (Cheak-Zamora, Teti, & First, 2015; Scheffkind, 2015). Adolescent youth experience a major anticipated life transition when graduating from secondary schooling to pursue postsecondary education. Adolescents are required to face and overcome obstacles when adapting to the transition to adulthood, but those with disabilities experience additional difficulties that adolescents without disabilities do not. Students with disabilities experience hardships with developing effective interpersonal communication skills and engaging in leisure exploration and participation. In addition, students often have difficulty adapting to the demands of a novel environment (Cheak-Zamora et al., 2015). In 1990, 26.3% of youth with disabilities enrolled in postsecondary education (Newman, Wagner, Cameto, & Knokey, 2010). The Individual's with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA) mandated secondary school programs address transition planning by the time students with disabilities graduate from high school in order to prepare them for adulthood, specifically postsecondary education (IDEA, 2004). In 2005, 45.6% of youth with disabilities enrolled in postsecondary education; the increase in percentage from 1990 shows that the preparation and readiness of students with disabilities transitioning from adolescence to adulthood resulted in a greater number of students attending postsecondary education (Newman et al., 2010).

## **Background and Nature of the Problem**

Due to the increase in the overall number of students with disabilities enrolling in postsecondary education, it is essential that specialized programs are implemented on college campuses to address difficulties associated with transitioning to adulthood for these students. Students with disabilities enrolled in secondary education programs are entitled to resources and services under IDEA, specifically Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), to assist them with their educational needs (IDEA, 2004). However, students pursuing postsecondary education are required to seek out and locate their own resources to assist them with the transition process (Gutman & Schindler, 2011). Currently, college campuses have disability services that are primarily utilized by students for educational purposes, but there are a limited number of specialized programs addressing other areas of occupations associated with the transition process. Parents of students with disabilities from a study conducted by Cheak-Zamora et al. (2015) indicated a desire for peer mentorship programs for their children in order to ensure a more successful and effective transition to adulthood.

The overall goal of a peer mentorship program is to provide students with disabilities the opportunity and necessary skills to become self-reliant adults within the community (Jones & Goble, 2012; O'Brien et al., 2009). Research suggests that utilizing adult rehabilitation regarding occupational therapy models may provide long-term benefits to students with disabilities as they will learn necessary skills to function in the community as an independent adult (Spencer, Emery, & Schneck, 2003). These skills and the overarching approach of a peer mentorship program compliments the profession of occupational therapy as the outcome for both is gained independence. Currently, there

is a limited amount of research pertaining to college students with disabilities and the services available for them. The specific service of a peer mentorship program has limited research as well. Therefore, this is a focus point of the current study to gain a better understanding of the perspectives of the peer mentors. The current study focused on the Student Organization for Accessibility and Resources (SOAR) peer mentorship program, affiliated with an occupational therapy department located on a college campus in the Midwest. This is the first study of its kind involving a peer mentorship program solely utilizing occupational therapy students as peer mentors focusing on all areas of occupation to help college students with disabilities successfully transition to postsecondary education, producing a unique and innovative study.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the student peer mentor's overall experience within the SOAR program, how the environment has affected their experience, and the occupation of being a peer mentor. The SOAR program is a relatively new program and no data has been obtained about its effectiveness as a peer mentorship program for college students with disabilities. The researchers aim in the current study was to obtain initial qualitative data about the peer mentors experience in the program and their views regarding its impact on their overall role as a peer mentor.

### **Theoretical Framework**

A qualitative phenomenological research design was chosen to illustrate the personal meaning behind the experience of being a peer mentor in a peer mentorship program from a holistic approach (Creswell, 2013b). Phenomenological research aims to

define a common meaning amongst a group of individuals based on their personal lived experiences (Creswell, 2013b; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008). Therefore, Giorgi and Giorgi's (2008) phenomenological approach was chosen for this study to develop an understanding of the experience of peer mentors in a postsecondary peer mentorship program and the influence of personal factors, the environment, and the occupation of being a peer mentor had on their overall experience. The Person-Environment-Occupation (PEO) Model was chosen as a foundation for the development of the interview protocol in addition to the data analysis process (Law, Cooper, & Strong, 1996).

### **Assumption**

It was assumed that individuals with disabilities require assistance transitioning to postsecondary education. This assumption was based on the literature review that indicated students with disabilities have difficulty with the following fundamental skills: (a) advocating for themselves, (b) developing interpersonal communication skills, (c) adapting to the demands of a new environment, and (d) engaging in the occupations that encompass the overall college experience (Cheak-Zamora et al., 2015).

### **Scope and Delimitation**

In conjunction with Giorgi and Giorgi's (2008) phenomenological approach, prior to and during the conduction of the interviews, the student researchers communicated with their advisor and each other about any biases or prejudices they had to encourage reflexivity. Data was collected via semi-structured interviews with participants. Interview questions were guided by the Person-Environment-Occupation (PEO) model and intended to gather information about personal factors, environmental influences, and

the occupation of being a peer mentor (Law, Cooper, & Strong, 1996). Data analysis was conducted using the phenomenological approach of Giorgi and Giorgi (2008). Lastly, the researchers interpreted the data to develop an overall understanding of the experience of being a peer mentor. This study took place over a three month period and interviews were conducted via FaceTime or phone call with participants from a Midwestern college in the United States. A total of six peer mentors were selected and interviewed for this study in order to provide the researchers with rich detail regarding the experience of being a peer mentor.

### **Importance of the Study**

This study aimed to benefit the occupational therapy emerging practice area of transition services for students with disabilities pursuing postsecondary education. A goal of this study was to provide information regarding peer mentorship programs as there currently is limited research regarding this topic. An additional goal of this program was to understand the experience of the peer mentor in order to make recommendations for the existing SOAR program to facilitate growth and development of the peer mentorship program.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following definitions are important to understand in order to have a greater understanding and appreciation of this study.

*Students with Disabilities (Mentee)* - “All students experiencing difficulty on campus due to disability (physical and mental health)”, S. Morrison (personal communication, April 11, 2016).

*Peer Mentorship Program (SOAR)* - “Is a student peer mentorship program whose mission is to facilitate participation in the college occupations of education, social participation, and leisure activities including resource identification for current college students who are experiencing disabilities impeding optimal performance in the college setting. This is facilitated by the collaborative efforts of the occupational therapy students located on the college campus” (Morrison, 2016a, para 1).

*Peer Mentor*- “Another student who can serve as a resource, offer a helping hand, support, and be a source of information for students with disabilities”, S. Morrison (personal communication, April 7, 2017).

*Postsecondary Education*- “Refers broadly to participation in three types of institutions: (1) two-year or community colleges; (2) vocational, business, or technical schools; (3) 4-year colleges” (Cleary, Persche, & Spencer, 2015, p. 737)



## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Studying postsecondary students with disabilities can be challenging because the research and the research samples are obtained from the students who have disclosed their disability to the Office of Disability Services on his or her campus (Herbert et al., 2014). Not all students disclose their disability to their campus's Office of Disability Services (Gaddy, 2015); therefore, these students are not included within the results of the research which can make the exact number of postsecondary students with disabilities difficult to obtain. Students that receive secondary education services under the Individual's with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA) want to start their postsecondary education experience without assistance; consequently, these students choose not to disclose their disability in order to avoid the negative labels and stigma that results from the disclosure (Getzel & Thoma, 2008).

Comparing research data regarding students with disabilities is also difficult because there is not a consistent disability terminology set in place (Herbert et al., 2014). In addition, Herbert et al. (2014) reviewed 27 national and government databases, 200 dissertations, articles, reviews of literature, books, and organizational links containing information about postsecondary education and found minimal pieces of literature pertaining to disability services impacting students with disabilities pursuing postsecondary education. Due to these factors and the researchers' own literature search,

postsecondary students with disabilities are a population that has limited conducted research.

In 1990, 26.3% of youth with disabilities enrolled in postsecondary education (Newman, Wagner, Cameto, & Knokey, 2010). The IDEA mandated secondary school programs address transition planning by the time students with disabilities graduate from high school in order to prepare them for adulthood, specifically postsecondary education (IDEA, 2004). In 2005, 45.6% of youth with disabilities enrolled in postsecondary education, a significant increase from 1990. This finding shows that the preparation and readiness of students transitioning from adolescence to adulthood resulted in a greater number of students with disabilities enrolling into postsecondary schools (Newman et al., 2010). As of 2012, 11% of undergraduate college students have a disability, which is approximately two million students (U. S. Department of Education, 2016). The graduation rate for students with disabilities is 65%, compared to the graduation rate of students without disabilities at 86% (Herbert et al., 2014).

### **The Transition to Postsecondary Education**

In 2014, 17.3 million people decided to take part in the major anticipated life transition of enrolling in a postsecondary institution (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Adolescent youth experience this major anticipated life transition when graduating from secondary schooling to pursue postsecondary education. Adolescents are required to face and overcome obstacles adapting to the transition to adulthood, but those with disabilities experience additional difficulties that adolescents without disabilities do not. Students with disabilities experience hardships with developing effective interpersonal communication skills, developing effective self-advocacy skills,

and engaging in leisure exploration and participation. In addition, students often have difficulty adapting to the demands of a new environment (Cheak-Zamora, Teti, & First, 2015).

Not only do students with disabilities have to adapt to the new environment during their transition to postsecondary education, but they also have to adjust to the differences in disability services (Cheak-Zamora, et al., 2015; Gutman & Schindler, 2011; Wilson, Bialk, Freeze, Freeze, & Lutfiyya, 2012). Students with disabilities enrolled in secondary education programs are entitled to resources and services under IDEA, specifically Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), to assist them with their educational needs (IDEA, 2004). IDEA governs the services provided to students with disabilities up until high school graduation (IDEA, 2004). For postsecondary students Title II under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 governs the accommodations available to them on college campuses (ADA, 1990; Rehabilitation Act of 1973, 1977). Title II under ADA indicates that a qualified individual with a disability must have sufficient access to programs and services located at a public entity (ADA, 1990). Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 indicates that qualified individuals with disabilities must have equal access to programs and services at organizations that receive federal assistance such as college campuses (Rehabilitation Act of 1973, 1977). Neither indicate that the public entity or college campus seek out the individuals with disabilities in order to help them locate the accommodations and services they may benefit from or utilize during their postsecondary education experience. Therefore, students pursuing postsecondary education are required to seek out and locate their own resources to assist them with the transition and education

process (Gutman & Schindler, 2011). Students with disabilities are required to utilize self-advocating skills in order to obtain disability services, creating a novel and additional challenge to their transition to postsecondary education (Barber, 2012; Cheak-Zamora et al., 2015; Getzel, McManus, & Briel, 2004; Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Gutman & Schindler, 2011).

### **Programs available for Postsecondary Students with Disabilities**

There are various pathways for students with disabilities seeking postsecondary education. The first is a traditional pathway for students pursuing a degree or certificate program that consists of students completing an entrance examination, application, and other protocols and requirements; similar to a student applying for postsecondary education without a disability (Hart et al., 2010). Accommodations such as interpreters, tutoring, counseling, and assistive technology are provided as needed for students pursuing this pathway to enable successful transition and participation in postsecondary education (Hart et al., 2010). The second pathway is a nontraditional approach that is specialized for students who are not pursuing a degree or certificate program. The nontraditional pathway gives students the opportunity to attend courses with or without receiving credit, take continuing education courses or take separate courses specifically designed for students with disabilities (Hart et al., 2010). In congruence with traditional and nontraditional pathways for obtaining postsecondary education, alternative pathways exist. Alternative pathways include: dual or concurrent enrollment options, college-initiated programs, and individual or family initiated supports (Hart et al., 2010).

Concurrent enrollment option programs are initiated by secondary education school systems as a mandated part of IDEA transitional services to give students with

disabilities the opportunity to college access when transitioning from secondary to postsecondary education (Hart et al., 2010; IDEA, 2004). Although concurrent enrollment programs exist on certain college campuses, not all programs support complete or even partial access to courses for students with disabilities (Hart et al., 2010). Support is needed for students in order to ensure that they acclimate to college life successfully and have access to learning opportunities as they no longer receive the services they once did in secondary education programs.

Another form on concurrent enrollment is initiated by the college in collaboration with state or federal agencies. Services are similar in scope to the secondary education collaboration; however local school systems supports are no longer provided. College-initiated programs entail the program basics of the concurrent enrollment program except support and services from the local school systems are no longer available for these students (Hart et al., 2010). Support for students with disabilities through this type of program are funded through state and federal agencies, such as vocational rehabilitation, instead of the local education systems based on what the end goal of the student entails (Hart et al., 2010). Individual or family-initiated supports are funded without support from an outside agency. Families or individual students create their own access to postsecondary education in various ways and is another alternative pathway utilized (Hart et al., 2010).

After the establishment of the programs and various pathways to pursue a postsecondary education, the ways in which the programs are implemented vary depending on the college campus and resources available. There are numerous benefits for the different ways in which postsecondary education programs are implemented.

Instructing students with disabilities in their natural environment with courses that are offered to all students gives them opportunity to learn independent living skills (Hart et al., 2010). The overall goal of this type of program is to allow students with disabilities to engage and learn in the least restricted environment and provide the ability for them to interact with students across campus (Hart et al., 2010).

Another beneficial implementation approach is person-centered planning. This approach focuses on the student's strengths and abilities as well as the priorities and goals the student wishes to accomplish (Hart et al., 2010; Orentlicher, 2015). Students have complete control through this approach to ensure that their innate desires and goals are accomplished through their postsecondary education experience (Hart et al., 2010).

Universal design programs are another implementation approach intended to serve the greatest number of students across all populations. The intention of this approach is for classrooms to be less restrictive and enable students the ability to attend courses with their peers, similar to the instructing in the student's natural environment implementation approach (Hart et al., 2010).

The final two implementation approaches involve a mentor or tutor to assist students with disabilities in maximizing their experience and potential in postsecondary education coursework. Through a mentor, such as a fellow peer, students are able to model and learn appropriate behavior in the classroom; in addition, to expanding their social network through their peer mentor as well as campus wide activities (Brown, Takahashi, & Roberts, 2010; Hart et al., 2010). Peer mentors can also serve as an outlet to discuss challenges the student is experiencing in relation to social situations and general college life. Educational coaches are similar to peer mentors, but they focus

more on the educational aspect of college life instead of the overall college experience. Educational coaches hone in on students' strengths and abilities to provide individualized support based on the students' needs to maximize their educational abilities (Hart et al., 2010). Electronic mentoring (e-mentoring) is another method utilized by students with disabilities. E-mentoring provides students with quick solutions as communication is done electronically, but mentors still hold personal relationships with mentees to assist them through their academic and career journeys (Burgstahler & Crawford, 2007).

### **Peer Mentorship Programs on College Campuses**

A peer mentorship program is a service that is available at some college campuses. Sometimes the peer mentorship program is offered through the Office of Disability Services, other times specific college major programs offer the peer mentorship service (Burgstahler & Crawford, 2007; College of Health and Human Sciences: Colorado State University, 2015; Farley, Gibbons, & Cihak, 2014; Morrison & Hanson, 2016). Peer mentorship programs for students with disabilities are geared towards helping the students with the transition process to postsecondary education and aiding them in the postsecondary education experience both academically and socially (Burgstahler & Crawford, 2007; Jones & Goble, 2012; Morrison & Hanson, 2016; Wilson et al., 2012).

Within the academic aspects of the peer mentor relationship assistance includes note-taking, homework assignments, locating and utilizing adaptive equipment, and most importantly the promotion of self-advocacy skills (Farley et al., 2014; Jones & Goble, 2012; Morrison & Hanson, 2016; Wilson et al., 2012). Self-advocacy skills are important for postsecondary students with disabilities to develop because they have to disclose their

disability to their professors and obtain disability services on their own (Barber, 2012; Getzel, McManus, & Briel, 2004; Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Herbert et al., 2014).

Socializing is a major aspect of peoples' lives. When transitioning to postsecondary education, students are exposed to a novel environment. Learning how to navigate this new environment socially may be difficult. Peer mentorship programs often times incorporate socialization to encourage successful transition. Peer mentors provide assistance in finding social events on campus, partaking in social events with their mentees, and further developing their communication and interpersonal skills when needed (Burgstahler & Crawford, 2007; Giust & Valle-Riestra, 2016; Jones & Goble, 2012; Morrison & Hanson, 2016; Wilson et al., 2012).

Having mentors and mentees as a core component of a peer mentorship program is essential and the strategies utilized for recruitment vary. The Campus Life program at the University of Manitoba employs graduate and undergraduate students to run the program and hold the position of peer mentors (Wilson et al., 2012). Jones and Goble (2012) conducted their research at a state-supported public university within the United States. This peer mentorship program recruited its mentors through an optional service learning assignment that is offered through two special education courses on campus. The peer mentors consisted of students who were pursuing either special education or education degrees. As a peer mentor, students received college credit within this specific peer mentorship program (Jones & Goble, 2012). Farley et al. (2014) interviewed peer mentors involved in a postsecondary education program for students with intellectual disabilities. Peer mentors consisted of undergraduate and graduate volunteers who discovered the peer mentoring opportunity through flyers, freshmen and honors seminars,



and by word-of-mouth (Farley et al., 2014). At Trinity College Dublin there is a peer mentorship program as well for students with intellectual disabilities and the peer mentors within this program consist of occupational therapy and clinical speech and language students (O'Brien et al., 2009). Colorado State University offers a peer mentorship program for students with disabilities and its mentors consist of occupational therapy students as well (College of Health and Human Sciences: Colorado State University, 2015).

Mentees constitute the other critical aspect of a peer mentorship program. The Campus Life Program at the University of Manitoba is a program that provides necessary support for students pursuing postsecondary education that have learning, intellectual, and developmental disabilities (University of Manitoba, 2016). The mentees researched within this program identified that they discovered the program through their friends or their parents put them on the waiting list for the program (Wilson et al., 2012). The education program at Trinity College Dublin encompasses students with intellectual disabilities with the majority having referrals by a service agency; with the exception of one student being referred by his or her family (O'Brien et al., 2008). Colorado State University offers a peer mentorship service for students with disabilities and the mentees are often referred to the program by the on campus Resources for Disabled Students Office. In addition, there is an online application where students can directly apply for the peer mentorship program (College of Health and Human Sciences: Colorado State University, 2015). The University of Washington has an e-mentoring community for high school and postsecondary students with disabilities (Burgstahler & Crawford, 2007). The University of Washington hired staff to be a part of the e-mentoring community with

the volunteered peer mentors; therefore, it is inferred that their Office of Disability Services knows of this e-mentoring community and may refer students to it as needed. In summary, of the six peer mentorship programs discussed only two indicate how the mentees are obtained for the program, but yet four of the programs reported how the peer mentors were recruited. This difference has the researchers questioning why the recruitment of mentees was not disclosed at the same rate as the mentors.

The environment can vary depending on the peer mentorship program. Some peer mentorship relationships take place in person (Farley et al., 2014; Jones & Goble, 2012; O'Brien et al., 2009; Wilson et al., 2012) and others take place over the Internet (Burgstahler & Crawford, 2007). In some peer mentorship programs, the peer mentors have disabilities as well (Burgstahler & Crawford, 2007). The ratio of peer mentors to mentees can also differ. The e-mentoring peer mentorship program at the University of Washington has the mentees and mentors in one community together (Burgstahler & Crawford, 2007). This type of environment increases the response times to questions that the mentees may ask. It also provides the mentees with multiple perspectives about the question they may ask the e-mentoring community (Burgstahler & Crawford, 2007). Some peer mentor programs allocate five to seven peer mentors to one mentee (Farley et al., 2014) while other programs have the peer mentorship relationship consist of one peer mentor to one mentee (Jones & Goble, 2012; O'Brien et al., 2009; Wilson et al., 2012).

It is known that some peer mentorship programs include a mentee cost. The education programs for students with intellectual disabilities include the peer mentorship service; therefore, this service is available for all of the students enrolled in these specific programs (Jones & Goble, 2012; O'Brien et al., 2008). These education programs allow

students with intellectual disabilities to register for typical college courses. Once the students are a part of the education program and enrolled in typical college courses they gain access to the peer mentorship service. These students are paying a standard cost for the education program and the peer mentorship service is an additional feature that is included in the program cost (Jones & Goble, 2012; O'Brien et al., 2008). At the University of Manitoba, students with either learning, intellectual, or developmental disabilities can enroll in The Campus Life Program. The students enrolled in this program pay for the Campus Life Program and the peer mentorship service is included (University of Manitoba, 2016). The peer mentorship program at Colorado State University is a fee for service program for students with disabilities, meaning it is not included within the student's tuition payments (College of Health and Human Sciences: Colorado State University, 2015). There are two pay options for the students, either \$2,000 per semester or \$75 per hour (College of Health and Human Sciences: Colorado State University, 2015).

### **Outcomes for Peer Mentorship Programs**

Postsecondary education is very different than high school education for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities transition from services provided automatically to an environment where they (a) have to disclose their disability to the Office of Disability Services, (b) register with the office, (c) provide documentation of their disability, (d) work with the Office of Disability Services in order to decide what accommodations they need, and at some postsecondary schools, and (e) provide professors with an accommodation letter in order to discuss their needed accommodations (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2009). In order to complete

these steps to receive services new skills are required. Barber (2012) completed interviews with 20 students with disabilities who successfully completed college and obtained a college degree. The results showed that students reported self-advocating and their own self-awareness of their disability was attributed to their successful completion of postsecondary education (Barber, 2012). These students also demonstrated adequate interpersonal skills and many attributed their completion of postsecondary education to having a supportive relationship with one specific person or mentor they had at the Office of Disability Services (Barber, 2012). Similar research findings showed that students with disabilities reported having peer support is what helped his or her performance during the postsecondary experience (Barnhill, 2016, Lombardi, Murray, & Gerdes, 2012; Shogren & Plotner, 2012).

Studies completed with peer mentorship programs have shown that self-advocacy is something the students with disabilities believe is an important skill to have and a skill that they have developed through peer mentorship programs (O'Brien et al., 2009; Wilson et al., 2009). Students with intellectual disabilities at Trinity College Dublin began to self-advocate for themselves at a higher level as their time within their college program and working with peer mentors progressed. The students formed a group together and advocated for themselves in order to obtain student identification cards in a timely fashion so they could have access to all of Trinity College Dublin's amenities that are available to all of its college students (O'Brien et al., 2009). Increased self-determination, self-awareness, self-esteem, and self-respect were also reported to be gained through the peer mentorship (Wilson et al., 2012). Another study showed that self-determination skills are what peer mentors work on with their mentees (Giust &

Valle-Riestra, 2016). Self-determination skills were built upon during transportation activities, social encounters with the mentees' professors, and social situations with the mentees' parents (Giust & Valle-Riestra, 2016). The mentors hoped these activities would help the mentees become more independent and prepare them for the workforce (Giust & Valle-Riestra, 2016). Peer mentors within peer mentorship programs feel as if they have further developed their advocacy skills as well. In one study, peer mentors reported further development of advocacy skills during a survey and one student wrote, "It has helped me grow a lot as an individual. It has taught me a lot about not judging others and how to stand up for those who are being judged..." (Farley et al., 2014, p. 656).

Students with disabilities ultimately hope to be treated with equality. Mentees within peer mentorship programs report that their mentors treat them equally, but that initially overcoming the challenge of providing supports and enabling independence within situations is difficult (Jones & Goble, 2012; O'Brien et al., 2009). The mentees report that this equality and balance within the mentorship keeps the relationship strong and enjoyable (Jones & Goble, 2012; O'Brien et al., 2009). Holding the role of a peer mentor has helped students without disabilities see the importance in treating everyone equally (Farley et al., 2014). Peer mentorship programs have helped people understand the importance of equality.

Assistance with academics is provided by the peer mentors and this assistance is valued and appreciated by the mentees, but social activities and the development of friendships between mentees and mentors is considered of greater importance (Farley et al., 2014; Giust & Valle-Riestra, 2016; Jones & Goble, 2012; O'Brien et al., 2009;

Wilson et al., 2012). Mentees and mentors report allowing time for social events and spontaneous social activities such as going out to eat or playing sports together makes the peer mentorship relationship genuine and successful (Farley et al., 2014; Jones & Goble, 2012; O'Brien et al., 2009). The formation of true friendships was found to be a benefit of the peer mentorship to both mentees and mentors (Farley et al., 2014; Jones & Goble, 2012; O'Brien et al., 2009).

Participating in social activities and forming a friendship with the mentee is important for the peer mentor to do, but social situations are another aspect of students' lives. The mentees within Wilson et al.'s (2012) research study reported that a challenge they faced during college was forming friendships with other classmates. This study did not address if the peer mentors helped the students with this challenge, but it shows they would benefit from assistance within this area. Inclusion was a main theme found within Giust and Valle-Riestra's (2016) research; inclusion entailed the mentors providing the mentees with assistance in social situations on and off campus. Mentors partaking in various social situations with their mentees reported the mentees were able to meet new people and practice appropriate social behaviors with the mentor's support when needed (Giust & Valle-Riestra, 2016). In a study done by Burgstahler and Crawford (2007) assistance within different social situations is provided. The mentees within this e-mentoring program asked the mentors for advice regarding multiple social situation scenarios, specifically job interviews and speaking with professors.

Outcomes from the above studies were all collected through qualitative research methods. Giust and Valle-Riestra (2016) and Farley et al. (2014) studied the mentors' perceptions and experiences regarding the peer mentorship program. Both sets of

researchers utilized questionnaires/surveys with open-ended questions in order to obtain the data from the peer mentors; additionally, Giust and Valle-Riestra (2016) had the peer mentors within their research study journal about every session with their mentees and this data was utilized.

O'Brien et al. (2009) and Wilson et al. (2012) examined the mentees' in the peer mentorship programs perceptions and experiences. Wilson et al. (2012) is written by two mentees with learning disabilities along with the help of other authors as well. The mentees told their stories to the researchers and the researchers then asked additional questions about their experiences, co-writing the article together. Heidi and Philip stressed the importance of the information being presented fully from their point of view because they are the people who are experiencing the program and living with a disability (Wilson et al., 2012). O'Brien et al. (2009) obtained data from the mentees through focus group discussion and reflective journals.

Burgstahler and Crawford (2007) along with Jones and Goble (2012) each studied an entire peer mentorship program through a case study design, collecting data from the faculty involved in the program, the mentees, and the mentors. In addition, Jones and Goble also collected data from university professors, parents of the mentees, and a representative from the university's Office of Disability Services (2012). A limitation of Burgstahler and Crawford's study (2007) is that they did not describe their data collection methods. On the contrary, Jones and Goble (2012) described their method of data collection and they conducted three 90-minute focus group discussions.

Peer mentorship programs are relatively new and to date most research is qualitative in nature. Most studies suggest qualitative methods employed were first steps

in preparing to collect quantitative data. In summary, the methods utilized thus far to collect data pertaining to peer mentorship programs include interviews, mentees describing their own experiences, focus group discussions, questionnaires, surveys, and reflective journals. While more research has been completed with mentees and mentors; family members and educational staff have additionally been the focus of research studies as well.

### **Occupational Therapy's Role in the Supported Education Process**

Supported education assists students with disabilities and enabling access to the highly valued student role and simultaneously giving students the opportunity to engage in meaningful activities (Gutman, Kerner, Zornbek, Dulek, & Ramsey, 2009).

Engagement in everyday occupations is fundamental to human nature as well as the foundation of the profession of occupational therapy. Students transitioning from high school to postsecondary education are entitled to occupational justice, specifically the “access to and participation in the full range of meaningful and enriching occupations afforded to others” (AOTA, 2014, p. S35). Students with disabilities have the right to experience all that college living has to offer including social leisure and participation, individual empowerment, and overall goal attainment (Morrison & Hanson, 2016). With the assistance from occupational therapists, students with disabilities can attain occupational justice using task and environmental analysis in order to enable engagement in all desired occupations within their new environment (Morrison & Hanson, 2016; Scheffkind, 2015). Occupational therapy supports the transition to postsecondary education by maximizing students’ occupational performance while adapting to their personal and situational environments (Scheffkind, 2015).



Self-determination is a huge predictor of transitional success and is described as having the necessary skills to make decisions and choices regarding one's life, problem-solving, setting personal goals, and being a self-advocate (Orentlicher, 2015).

Occupational therapy can assist students to become self-advocates by initiating services in conjunction with being resourceful in their community to increase self-determination (Orentlicher, 2015). Postsecondary education not only includes preparing students for college, but also serves as a life-long learning opportunity (Hong, 2015; Orentlicher, 2015). The skills and opportunities students acquire in the transition process shapes how students will carry these skills over into their adult life outside of postsecondary education. It is pivotal that students gain the necessary skills for self-sustaining adulthood when entering the real world with the absence of the structure and guidance they received in their secondary education. Occupational therapy plays a significant role in the transition to postsecondary education as therapists have the necessary skills to provide students with crucial skills for independent living.

### **Peer Mentorship Programs and Occupational Therapy**

Peer mentorship programs are a natural fit for occupational therapy as many of the issues experienced by students are occupational in nature. Occupational therapy is defined as “the therapeutic use of everyday life activities (occupations) with individuals or groups for the purpose of enhancing or enabling participation in roles, habits, and routines in home, school, workplace, community and other settings” (AOTA, 2014, p. S1). College students with disabilities often times struggle with independent living skills, community participation, and employment (Kardos & White, 2005). The overall goal of a peer mentorship program is to provide students with disabilities the opportunity and

necessary skills to become self-reliant adults within the community (Jones & Goble, 2012; O'Brien et al., 2009). Research suggests that utilizing adult rehabilitation regarding occupational therapy models may provide long-term benefits to students with disabilities as they will learn necessary skills to function in the community as an independent adult (Spencer, Emery, & Schneck, 2003). These skills and the overarching approach of a peer mentorship program compliments the profession of occupational therapy as the outcome for both is gained independence.

Peer mentorship programs focus on various skills involving social participation, education, leisure participation and various personal skills; all of which are areas of occupation and performance patterns that are addressed by the occupational therapy profession. One aspect of social participation that is emphasized in a peer mentorship program is increasing students' confidence and providing the opportunity to expand social networks with the mentors themselves as well as mainstream college peers (O'Brien et al., 2009). Socialization is a pivotal aspect of a peer mentorship program as the relationship between the mentor and the mentee is both dynamic and reciprocal focusing on personal and professional development (Brown, Takahashi & Roberts, 2010). In order for the peer mentorship relationship to develop a strong collaborative partnership, the relationship must include time for socializing and enjoying each other's company (Jones & Goble, 2012; Morrison & Hanson, 2016; O'Brien et al., 2009). Peer mentors themselves report the relationship being positive and having a profound effect on their life including intrapersonal enrichment, personal growth, interpersonal skills development, and the formation of a friendship (Farley et al., 2014). Throughout various research studies, it was determined that the overall desire of the mentee was to build

social skills through their mentor to be able to engage in social participation within their community (Cheak-Zamora et al., 2015; Jones & Goble, 2012).

Assistance with education was another common theme found throughout various research studies regarding peer mentorship programs. Peer mentors provide encouragement, their personal focused attention and insight, and academic assistance (Burgstahler & Crawford, 2007). Education is a focus area of the occupational therapy profession and it supports the partnership of peer mentorship programs and the occupational therapy profession. Although education is a focus area of peer mentorship programs, research indicates that when the peer mentorship relationship was only focused on academic pursuits, the relationship was negatively affected (Jones & Goble, 2012). Students with disabilities have difficulty with community participation due to the unfamiliarity of their new environment when transitioning from high school to postsecondary education (Kardos & White, 2005). An important part of the peer mentorship relationship is for the mentors to provide students with opportunities and skills for community participation and socialization (Cheak-Zamora et al., 2015).

Peer mentorship programs also address various student performance patterns throughout the program, one of the main ones being their role as a student. Self-advocacy is a necessary part of fulfilling the role of being a student as well as being a self-sustaining adult within the community. Students with disabilities have difficulty advocating their needs to receive necessary services (Hong, 2015). Many students worry about leaving high school as they had the support they needed while they were attending secondary education, but pursuing postsecondary education requires students to seek out services independently (Cheak-Zamora et al., 2015). Occupational therapists can help

build self-advocacy skills and encourage students to be assertive in requesting needed services on college campuses (AOTA, 2014). Peer mentors help to facilitate and develop personal motivation as well as assist students in defining their role as a student (Jones & Goble, 2012). Roles are defined as “a set of behaviors expected by society and shaped by culture and context” (AOTA, 2014, p. S8). Occupational therapy focuses on a person’s role and how these roles help to guide in the selection of certain occupations that a person engages in (AOTA, 2014).

Throughout the transition process, students are expected to adapt and change based on their new campus environment. Assisting students in the transition to a new environment should be addressed by peer mentorship programs due to the change and required adaptation to new living situations, but there is a lack of research discussing this aspect of the transition process. Holistically, occupational therapy examines the environment a person engages in and determines their routines, goals, and desires to function successfully in that environment (Arbesman & Logsdon, 2011; Scheffkind, 2015). Data suggests that a substantial number of students with disabilities transitioning to community living on a college campus may benefit from improved living skills that are uniquely provided by occupational therapists (Spencer et al., 2003). For these reasons, occupational therapy should be considered at the forefront for peer mentorship programs as the necessary skills for successful transition to postsecondary education and living are crucial for functional independence within one’s community.

### **Student Organization for Accessibility and Resources (SOAR)**

A college located in the Midwest has a peer mentorship program, the Student Organization for Accessibility and Resources program (SOAR). Students with

disabilities are referred to the program from the disability service counselor on campus, the director of student success services, and/or the counseling personnel (Morrison & Hanson, 2016). Students can be referred directly from the student success center, disability services, or counseling center. Students can also self-identify; however, the student must have a mental or physical disability to qualify (Morrison & Hanson, 2016). The peer mentorship service is provided by the student members of the Student Occupational Therapy Association, and is free to currently enrolled postsecondary students who have a disability (Morrison, 2016c). SOAR was developed to serve individuals with mental and physical disabilities as the primary population.

When the referral is received and the student with a disability is a part of the peer mentorship program, he or she receives a team of four occupational therapy students (Morrison & Hanson, 2016). The team collaborates with the student in order to decide the frequency and duration of the sessions (Morrison & Hanson, 2016). The SOAR team has areas that they provide support with for the student and those areas are included within SOAR's mission statement. SOAR's mission statement guides the services and it reads:

SOAR (Student Organization for Accessibility and Resources): Is a student peer mentorship program whose mission is to facilitate participation in the college occupations of education, social participation, and leisure activities including resource identification for current college students who are experiencing disabilities impeding optimal performance in the college setting. This is facilitated by the collaborative efforts of the occupational therapy students located on the college campus (Morrison, 2016a, para 1).

To ensure participation within these activities, the student with a disability fills out a participant meeting form that includes questions about who was present at the meeting, aspects of the SOAR mission statement that were addressed, the activity, concerns, upcoming relevant events, the next planned meeting, and the upcoming meeting's anticipated activities (Morrison, 2016b). The aspects from the mission statement that may be addressed within a meeting between mentors and mentee include organization, self-advocacy, social participation and/or leisure activities, or resource identification and communication (Morrison, 2016b). SOAR started serving individuals the fall semester of 2013 and currently encompasses 36 peer mentors (S. Morrison, personal communication, July 19, 2016). When SOAR started in 2013 it provided services to three individuals during the 2013/2014 academic year, in the 2014/2015 academic year it served four individuals, the 2015/2016 school year six individuals were provided with services (S. Morrison, personal communication, July 19, 2016). The maximum individuals that can be served through the SOAR program is nine (S. Morrison, personal communication, July 19, 2016).

The SOAR program has not yet been researched; therefore, the researchers of this study do not know what the outcomes will be. This qualitative phenomenological research study is in place in order to gain an understanding of the peer mentors' experiences in the SOAR program, how the environment of the program has affected their experience, and what the occupation of a peer mentor within this program looks like.

### **CHAPTER III**

#### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

For the purpose of this research study, a qualitative research design was chosen to illustrate the personal meaning behind the experience of being a peer mentor in a peer mentorship program from a holistic approach (Creswell, 2013b). Qualitative research encompasses understanding the experience of the participants' first-hand by empowering them to tell their stories in their natural context (Creswell, 2013b). Using humans as a source of information allows the researcher to develop a rich data analysis and analyze various themes relating to the issue or problem that emerge throughout (Creswell, 2013b). The intention of this research study was to understand the experiences of peer mentors in a peer mentorship program. To fully capture the experiences of the peer mentors, occupational therapy students participating in the Student Organization for Accessibility and Resources (SOAR) program, a qualitative research study design was appropriate to help facilitate complete understanding of their experiences and the impact it had on their quality of life. Quality of life is what drives the profession of occupational therapy in being client-centered, enabling the client to direct the therapy process (AOTA, 2014). Qualitative research is similar in nature as the research is driven by the participant instead of a preconceived notion of an issue or problem determined by the researcher. This concept makes qualitative research a suitable research design for this study (Creswell, 2013b).

There are five various approaches for designing a qualitative study (Creswell, 2013b). For the purpose of this research study, a phenomenological study design was chosen. Phenomenological research aims to define a common meaning amongst a group of individuals based on their personal lived experiences (Creswell, 2013b; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008). A phenomenon is described as a human experience that becomes universal by investigating the lived experiences of individuals who have endured the event first-hand (Creswell, 2013b). The guiding theory for this study was the Person-Environment-Occupation (PEO) Model (Law, Cooper, & Strong, 1996). The PEO Model investigates three major components: the person, environment, and the occupation (Law et al., 1996). The model focuses on the interactions between the components as being transactions instead of interactive, meaning these components are studied together instead of separate of one another (Law et al., 1996). With the use of this occupation-based model, the researchers hoped to investigate the phenomenon of being a peer mentor and the personal, environmental, and occupational effects it has on their overall experience.

### **Role of Researchers**

The researchers in a phenomenological approach play a vital role in the data collection process (Creswell, 2013b). Since the researchers have a fundamental role in the data collection, analysis and interpretation process, reflexivity is required to reduce overall biases regarding the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013b). This enables the researchers to separate their personal experiences with the phenomenon and clearly focus on the experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2013b).

Student researchers had one semester of qualitative research experience prior to the conduction of this study where they were responsible for conducting, transcribing,



coding, and analyzing interview data. The student researchers had been in the occupational therapy program at the University of North Dakota for two years. They had the ability to accurately assess the occupational performance skills of the participants, the activity demands of the interview, and the review process of the transcription and interview analysis. Each researcher had also completed one 12-week internship working with people who have mental health disabilities and by the time the research process began, each of them completed one 12-week internship with people who have physical disabilities. The advisor also had expertise in phenomenological research. She provided guidance and supervision to the graduate occupational therapy students. Student researchers engaged in peer debriefing prior to and throughout the interview and data analysis process in order to eliminate any misconceptions regarding the phenomenon being studied.

### **Data Collection/Locale of Study**

The process of phenomenological research is to focus the research on the experiences of the participants. In order for this to occur, the researchers must first recognize and discuss their personal experiences with the phenomenon to eliminate prejudices and biases (Creswell, 2013a). By separating any potential prejudices and biases, the researchers will be able to formulate a clear understanding of the human experience of the participants. Through the process, the data was conducted through several semi-structured interviews. Interview questions consisted of general questions with the intent to allow the participant to elaborate and depict personal experiences regarding the topic.

Prior to commencing the study, University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board approval was received. Six semi-structured interviews were conducted with recruited participants that met the inclusion criteria for this study. The interview questions were designed based on the PEO model (Law et al., 1996) and questions were developed focusing on the influence of personal factors, environmental supports and the occupational demands of being involved in a peer mentorship program (see Appendix A).

Informed consent was sent to participants via email prior to the initiation of the interview process to enable participants the option of accepting or denying commitment to participate in the study. If the participant agreed to participate, informed consent was discussed between the researcher and participant at the time of the interview for thorough understanding of the purpose of the study.

A verbal consent form was emailed to participants prior to the interview (see Appendix B). Verbal consent was received via Skype, FaceTime, or over the phone preceding the initiation of the interview session. Audio taping was used to record each individual interview with participants for transcription. Once the interviews were conducted, researchers transcribed them verbatim using the audio recordings for accuracy. In order to ensure confidentiality, the use of participant names was avoided by utilizing pseudonyms determined by researchers. This allowed the researchers to separate and identify information from various participants while maintaining confidentiality. Demographic information from the interviews was not recorded on the audio recording device. The transcription process took place in either a secluded room in the School of Medicine and Health Sciences at the University of North Dakota or a private place within the researchers' residence. Information collected from transcriptions

were kept on the researchers personal computers in a password protected file. After the transcriptions were completed, the audio recordings used to collect data were destroyed. To ensure accuracy, transcribed interviews were sent via email to participants for member checking review. Concluding the data analysis process, transcribed interviews were printed off and kept in Professor Sarah Nielsen's locked office for three years following the study. Once the interviews were printed, electronic records were destroyed. The transcribed paper copies will also be destroyed following the three year time frame.

### **Study Participants**

Participants were recruited via a non-randomized convenience sampling method (Berg & Lune, 2012). The recruitment process was initiated by the researchers sending an informative letter via email to the SOAR coordinator explaining the purpose of the study and identified inclusion criteria for participation (see Appendix C). The SOAR coordinator then sent the letter to peer mentors in the SOAR program via email. The inclusion criteria for participants in this study includes: a) peer mentor in the peer mentorship program currently providing services through the SOAR program, b) at least one full academic semester of previous experience as a peer mentor in the SOAR program. Peer mentors who were not actively providing services through the SOAR program and those who had less than one full academic semester of experience as a peer mentor were excluded from this study. Peer mentors that met the inclusion criteria and identified interest in participating in the study set up arrangement times for the interview over the phone or by email.

Six participants were selected to participate in this study to provide researchers with a meaningful understanding of the peer mentor experience. The interviews were conducted using FaceTime on a password protected device or over the phone with the addition of audio recording for transcription purposes. Interviews were arranged in confidential locations consisting of a private room in the School of Medicine and Health Sciences at the University of North Dakota or in the private residences of the researchers. The participants were involved in the entirety of the research process from the initial interview through data analysis, encompassing a six-month time period. The interviews were conducted between January 26 and February 9, 2017. The interviews ranged from 34 minutes to 54 minutes and took additional time after interviews were completed for transcription and member checking.

### **Participant Profiles**

The subsequent six participant profiles are based on FaceTime or over the phone interviews. The names of the participants were replaced with participant (P) and a number (1-6) that corresponded to the interview to maintain content for confidentiality purposes.

P1 is in her first year of an accredited occupational therapy program and identified as a female. She has been a peer mentor for one full academic semester prior to participating in her interview. She is currently working with the same student that she did last semester as her student has remained consistent throughout her peer mentorship experience.

P2 identifies as a female and is a first year student in an accredited occupational therapy program. Throughout her peer mentorship experience, she had worked with the

same student. She had worked with her student for one full academic semester prior to participating in her interview.

P3 is a female occupational therapy student in her first year of an accredited program and had been a peer mentor for one full academic semester prior to the conduction of her interview. She currently and has only worked with the same student throughout her peer mentorship experience.

P4 is a female in her second year of an accredited occupational therapy program. She has been a peer mentor for three full academic semesters. She has worked with one student throughout her peer mentorship experience and is currently working with that same student.

P5 identifies as a female and is in her first year of an accredited occupational therapy program. She had been a peer mentor for one full academic semester prior to the conduction of her interview. She currently is working with the same student that she did in her previous semester of experience as a peer mentor.

P6 is a first year student in an accredited occupational therapy program and identifies as a female. She had one full academic semester of experience as a peer mentor prior to participating in her interview. She had only worked with one student throughout her experience as a peer mentor.

### **Unit of Analysis**

The unit of qualitative analysis was the interviews with the peer mentors currently involved in the SOAR peer mentorship program. Study participants were occupational therapy students from a University in the Midwest. Once consent was received from participants, interviews were conducted using audio recording and were transcribed.

## **Data Analysis**

As mentioned above, researchers are the vital component of the data collection and analysis process. Prior to and during to the conduction of the interviews, the student researchers communicated with their advisor and each other about any biases or prejudices they had to encourage reflexivity. Data analysis was conducted using the phenomenological approach of Giorgi and Giorgi (2008). After the interviews were completed, the researchers transcribed them verbatim. Participants were given the opportunity to review the transcriptions to confirm accuracy and advance credibility.

Following data collection, data analysis was performed to capture the groups' overall experience and personal outlooks on the topic (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008). The final step was the interpretation of the data discussing the essence of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2013a). First, researchers were responsible for reading through the entire transcription of each individual interview. The purpose of this step was to maintain a holistic approach and gain a global understanding of the phenomenon before proceeding with the data analysis process (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008). Second, the researchers generated 'meaning units' from the transcriptions to gather meaning from the participant's interviews (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008). This was done by the researchers placing a slash mark in the text when they experienced a transition in meaning (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008).

The third step of the data analysis process involved the researchers developing generalizations about participants' experiences based on the 'meaning units' (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008). The purpose of this step was for the researchers to see how various dimensions of the participants' experiences relate to each other; therefore, transforming

the ‘meaning units’ into generalizations to eliminate situation-specific analyses (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008). The final step consisted of the researchers analyzing the transformations in step three to determine the main foundations that encompass the structure of the overall study (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008). The guiding PEO Model (Law et al., 1996), was utilized to assist in structuring and discussing the findings.

The Giorgi and Giorgi (2008) phenomenological approach to data analysis helped the researchers understand how various factors influenced peer mentors’ overall experience participating in a peer mentorship program. Findings were easily identified utilizing the grid format system put into place by Giorgi and Giorgi (2008). The grid format and use of transformations allowed the researchers to discuss and agree upon the overall meaning of the group’s experience (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008).

### **Credibility**

Credibility is measured by the validity and reliability of a study which influences overall trustworthiness (Creswell, 2013c). Validation strategies are applied to design considerations, collecting data, and analysis of results (Creswell, 2013c). The eight main validity strategies are as follows; prolongs engagement and persistent observation, triangulation, peer review or debriefing, negative case analysis, clarifying researcher bias, member checking, rich and thick description, and external audits (Creswell, 2013c).

The researchers used triangulation of multiple interviews and member checking to build trust between the researchers and the participants. Triangulation was important for improving the credibility of the findings and interpretations. This study achieved triangulation by conducting six interviews with multiple peer mentors in the SOAR program. Researchers utilized peer debriefing throughout the study to keep thoughts

transparent and free of any preconceived notions or biases. Member checking was done at the point of analysis as well as the interview interpretation. Participants were given the option to review the transcribed interview by the researchers as well as the individual analysis of the findings. This was completed in order to confirm that the findings held true for each of the six participant's interviews. Researchers utilized the data analysis approach of Giorgi and Giorgi (2008) that applied a grid format approach. The Giorgi and Giorgi (2008) grid format approach enabled overall transparency of the process by allowing researchers to thoroughly review, discuss, and agree upon data transformations and the primary meaning of the participants' experience. A sample is provided in Appendix D. All transcribed data and audio recordings were saved by the researchers to check for content accuracy of the preliminary findings before and after the conclusion of the study. Audio recordings were destroyed upon the completion of the interview transcriptions. Four of six participants replied to the researchers via email by the set deadline approving the interview transcriptions and summaries to ensure credibility and accuracy (see Appendix E). Participants were given the option to respond to the emails if they wanted to make any changes or add additional information, but were not required to do so.

### **Reliability**

Reliability is another key component to establish the overall credibility of a research study. Researchers integrated reliability in the study by using quality audio recordings and verbatim transcription from these recordings. In addition, participants were provided with the opportunity to review full transcriptions for editing or further explanation. The researchers followed Giorgi and Giorgi's (2008) phenomenology



approach, which provided transparency of the data analysis process. Through the use of these techniques, the researchers safeguarded the fabrication of a reliable study.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **RESULTS**

#### **Qualitative Findings**

The broad qualitative research question was, “What is the experience of the peer mentor in the Student Organization for Accessibility and Resources (SOAR) program?”

Sub questions include: (a) How has this experience impacted you personally?

Professionally? (b) What impact has the physical environment had on the peer

mentorship process? Social environment? and (c) How would you describe your role as a

mentor? This section of the chapter encompasses a detailed description of the analysis

procedures as well as related qualitative findings pertaining to the experience of being a peer mentor.

#### **Data Analysis**

Giorgi and Giorgi’s (2008) data analysis method was closely followed as described in Chapter three. The focus of the analysis was to better understand the experience of peer mentors in the SOAR program. The Person-Environment-Occupation (PEO) Model was utilized to formulate the interview questions and to analyze the data (Law, Cooper, & Strong, 1996). Individual participants were asked to comment on the preceding broad statements: (a) Tell me about your personal experience as a peer mentor, (b) Describe for me how you have been supported throughout the peer mentorship process, and (c) Describe for me activities and tasks that you engaged in to prepare for your role as a peer mentor. To be consistent with qualitative philosophy participants had

the opportunity to share any experiences related to the occupation of being a peer mentor and views that were meaningful to them.

### **Presentation of the Findings**

Data was presented in three consecutive parts ensuring consistency with the data analysis procedures of phenomenology. Presenting the data in this way allows the reader to be able to follow the precise method that took place throughout the analysis process. First, the individual interview summaries are presented. These summaries provide an overview of the individual participant's experience and symbolize the individual interview analysis completed. Second, the general structure of the entire group's experience is presented. Lastly, the key constituents are discussed supporting the general structure of the overall experience in detail from the participant's interviews. By presenting the findings through this method, greater transparency was attained.

### **Individual Interview Summaries**

**P1:** Initially, P1 felt that defining her role as a peer mentor was challenging. As time progressed, communication with her mentee and other group members was a significant component of fulfilling her role as a peer mentor. Since P1 had never worked with someone with a developmental disability before, she had to learn how to effectively communicate with her mentee and apply learning strategies that best accommodated her mentee's needs. P1 felt that she learned valuable information about this population through her experience as a peer mentor. In order to be an impactful peer mentor, she had to view things from a holistic perspective to come up with solutions to meet the needs of her mentee and overcome challenges faced throughout the process. At times, P1 felt it was difficult to fulfill her role as a peer mentor due to others viewing the program

very positively; therefore, these individuals had high expectations about what the role of a peer mentor entailed. This outlook on the program caused P1 to feel like she let down her mentee at times as it took time for her to feel comfortable and confident in her role as a peer mentor.

Many roles were developed throughout the process of being a peer mentor. P1 indicated that she assumed the role of a teacher, coach, instructor, and mother-figure throughout the experience. P1 indicated that it was challenging to only assume the role of a peer throughout the peer mentorship process as the main focus of sessions with her mentee were school-related tasks, making it difficult to form a peer relationship. This experience enhanced P1's professional growth as it positively impacted her interpersonal skills needed for working in a professional environment. The experience of being a peer mentor also had personal meaning for P1 as it became a personal investment for her. P1 explained that through this experience, she had the opportunity to care for someone other than herself and was unaware of the influence that another person can have on one's life. Although meeting with her mentee seemed like a chore or a burden at times, P1 indicated that she was grateful when she did get to meet with her mentee because she was able to see her mentee grow and develop throughout the peer mentorship process.

P1 expressed that she wished there was more support provided to her as a peer mentor at the initiation of the process. P1 found herself utilizing a trial and error approach with her mentee as the lack of basic knowledge about their mentee created a challenge for the peer mentors in her group, as well as herself. After getting past the initial stage of the peer mentorship process, it was suggested that the peer mentors became more comfortable in their role as P1 described the overall experience as being

positive. P1 suggested that the services her group provided through the SOAR program could also be beneficial for other individuals on campus. P1 indicated the SOAR program is not advertised due to it being difficult to explain what the role of a peer mentor entails. This could potentially cause students within the campus community who may benefit from the program deter from seeking out services.

In regards to utilizing resources in the community, it was suggested that familiarity with the context is a limiting factor as P1 was new to the college campus at the time of first being a peer mentor. P1's social environment was both positively and negatively affected throughout the peer mentorship process. P1 felt that in general, this experience increased her social exposure as she met numerous people that she would not have met without being involved in the SOAR program. However, P1 felt that her social environment was negatively affected when she saw other peer mentorship groups on campus and was unsure if she could interact with her peers in that situation.

Overall, this experience taught P1 the importance of accepting and understanding individuals on a deeper level in order to establish a healthy therapist-patient relationship in her future as an occupational therapist. The peer mentorship experience was described as being eye opening for P1 as she learned the value of empathy. Specifically, empathizing with individuals with disabilities transitioning to postsecondary education and the need for services to help them successfully acclimate to college life.

**P2:** In preparation for being a peer mentor, P2 tried to develop a full understanding of who her mentee was as a person as well as determining what her role as a peer mentor would entail and how she could contribute in the most beneficial way. Initially, P2 felt that it was hard to determine whether or not she was doing the correct

thing with her mentee. This suggested a lack of structure and support at the beginning of the peer mentorship process. P2 felt that it would have been beneficial if they were presented with more information regarding their mentee's diagnosis and specific strategies for overcoming challenges before working with their mentee. Despite these initial challenges, the experience was a good learning opportunity for P2 as she was able to get to know someone outside of the context of her classroom and felt she was able to influence their life in a positive way. P2 described that through working with this population, she was learned more about her mentee and watched them grow, creating an overall personally meaningful experience.

Collaboration with other group members was important throughout the peer mentorship process as group members did not all meet at the same time with their mentee. P2 indicated that it was important to establish effective means of communication with all group members for consistency and effectiveness throughout the mentorship process. P2 emphasized that she used the therapeutic modes learned throughout her academic coursework and applied them to working with her mentee. She identified that instructing, problem-solving, and encouraging were the modes she used most often throughout her experience. It was suggested that being an occupational therapy student influenced one's ability to assume the role of a peer in a peer mentorship relationship due to the development of therapeutic skills and the helpful nature of the profession. P2's peers were a consistent source of support for her throughout the peer mentorship process providing collaboration and feedback impacting her personal and professional growth. P2 indicated that she developed professional skills throughout the peer mentorship

experience. Skills included being altruistic, looking at a person from various perspectives, and valuing the power of empathy.

Taking on the role of a peer mentor was initially perceived as being a daunting task. Through observation of the growth and development her mentee achieved, P2 felt the experience was worth the challenges and the effort put forth, transforming her overall attitude into being a positive experience. P2 felt that allowing her mentee to engage in activities they enjoyed created meaningful moments not only for her mentee, but for P2 as well. In order to facilitate a peer relationship, P2 indicated she felt it was important to get to know her mentee on a personal level and engage in activities that were meaningful. From a peer mentorship standpoint, P2 indicated it was hard to assume the role of a peer if their mentee primarily wanted to focus on school-related tasks. This suggested that assuming the role of a peer may be challenging, but is a valued role of a peer mentor relationship.

Also P2 gained insight for the growth and potential the profession of occupational therapy can have by educating and providing positive college experiences to students with disabilities. Through this experience, P2 learned valuable personal skills and the value of treating individuals equally regardless whether or not they have a disability. It was suggested that having to collaborate with others in regards to the care of an individual facilitated team building and valuable interpersonal skills to be used in the workplace for effective collaboration amongst professionals.

**P3:** P3 indicated that the peer mentorship process involved getting to know her mentee, communicating with group members and course instructors, and figuring out her mentee's overall goals and associated activities to achieve the identified goals.

Communication both facilitated learning and created challenges for P3 throughout the peer mentorship process. P3 indicated that communication was a large component of the peer mentorship process, but also posed barriers when communication was not consistent between group members. It was suggested that both formal and informal communication amongst group members was important for collaboration throughout the peer mentorship process to encourage a team approach.

Advocacy played a huge role throughout the peer mentorship process for both P3 and her mentee. Through this experience, P3 realized self-advocacy is a skill that is pertinent to everyone's life. The main focus of sessions were related to the occupation of social participation; specifically, self-advocacy skills, decision-making techniques, prioritization, resource identification, and overall classroom participation. It was suggested that social participation was an impactful area of occupation not only for P3's mentee, but for other students with disabilities within the campus community as well.

P3 identified that this experience enhanced her interpersonal skills through working with an individual and allowing her to interact and build relationships with others. P3 felt that going out into the community with her participant enabled her to be more comfortable emerging herself into the community, impacting her social environment in a positive way. It was assumed that engaging in social participation activities was beneficial for both P3 and her mentee. In addition to this experience being personally meaningful, it also helped P3 grow and develop professionally. P3 identified that learning effective communication skills, being culturally competent, and building relationships with others all impacted her in a professional manner.



P3 felt that she was adequately supported throughout the peer mentorship process and the SOAR program provided her with a positive learning experience. This gave her the opportunity to expand her skill set through hands-on experience working with her mentee. In regards to how other people view the SOAR program, P3 felt that not many people in the community know about the program. For the people who do know about the program, P3 felt that external supports in the community think the program is a unique opportunity for both the mentees and the mentors involved. P3 felt the social environment of the campus was very accepting of students with disabilities and facilitated a suitable environment for the peer mentor relationship to grow. Through the experience of being a peer mentor, P3 felt she further developed her role as a student by interacting with different people and connecting in unique ways socially, academically, and professionally with her mentee.

P3 engaged in many activities with her mentee including crafts, walking around campus, and attending sporting events, and visiting campus museums. Engaging in activities helped facilitate meaningful social participation for both P3 and her mentee. P3 felt there was a discrepancy between the number of students with disabilities pursuing postsecondary education and transitional services available. P3 described this experience as being eye opening to the lack of services available for this population; therefore, she tried to push her mentee to try new things even if she was uncomfortable. This approach helped simulate real life circumstances to prepare her mentee for potential obstacles when integrating to a novel college environment. P3 felt that this discrepancy could be a potential opportunity for the profession of occupational therapy to make a positive difference in transitional services with this population.

**P4:** P4 viewed the overall peer mentor experience as a great experience. P4 felt the extended time period she received working with the same mentee, which is a college student with a developmental disability, was beneficial for the peer mentorship experience. This experience led to P4's view of the peer mentorship program as a beneficial program and she wished more people knew about it and understood what the program does for individuals with disabilities.

P4 indicated her values and beliefs are different than her mentee's. P4 learned that her values and beliefs have to be put aside when working with the mentee. She learned to embrace the mentee's values and beliefs and utilize those to collaborate and make goals for the mentee to work towards during their meetings.

P4 indicated a barrier during the peer mentor experience was that Disability Services on campus, professors, other students, and even some occupational therapy students did not understand what the peer mentorship program fully entails, the services it provides to college students with disabilities, and some did not know the peer mentorship program even exists. P4 indicated that she educated professors about the peer mentor services she provided, how the mentee's developmental disability affected the mentee within areas of occupation, and occasionally how course assignments and materials needed to be restructured in order to promote successful learning for the mentee. P4 expressed feelings of frustration and disappointment when professors did not understand the mentee's disability and how the disability affects the mentee's participation within areas of occupation.

A challenge P4 encountered was she became very "attached" to the mentee she worked with and she found it difficult to not see her mentee succeed within college

courses at the same capacity as other college students. Looking at the situation from the mentee's perspective, seeing the mentee's accomplishments, and realizing the peer mentorship services were helpful for the mentee helped P4 move past her feelings of letting down her mentee and to overcome this challenge.

P4 felt the peer mentor experience helped her in many ways and these ways included: knowledge she does not think she would have been able to get from any other experience, a set of tools and resources she can utilize, how to locate resources and services, a more equal outlook on individuals with developmental disabilities, the development of effective communication skills, different topics of conversation are appropriate when taking on different roles, how to be respectful and collaborate with future clients whom may be the same age as her, increased her self-awareness, and how to establish rapport with individuals. P4 indicated the development of these skills and the vast knowledge this experience provided will help her within her future work as an occupational therapist and she appreciated that.

P4 indicated there was not an orientation process for becoming a peer mentor, this resulted in feelings of not fully understanding her role as a peer mentor. As time progressed and her knowledge base increased from what she was learning in her occupational therapy courses P4 realized she needed to broaden her focus to assisting the mentee in gaining the overall college experience and the development of skills to be successful within the experience.

P4 indicated she took on many different roles throughout the peer mentorship experience when working with the mentee. These roles consisted of friend, support system, and mentor. P4 took on the role of a leader when working with the other peer

mentors within her group. Activities P4 engaged in to prepare for her role as a peer mentor and to develop her role included that she researched the areas and services available on campus, researched the things her mentee liked, worked on the development of her communication skills, and created open lines of communication between her mentee and with the other peer mentors in her group as well.

P4 stated the physical environment of the college campus supported the peer mentorship process by providing adequate accessibility to resources, services, and spaces available on the campus when working on the area of education with the mentee. The campus's physical and social environment positively impacted the peer mentorship process providing P4 with many social events to attend with her mentee. P4 always met with her mentee on campus and never within the environment of the community, P4 also only utilized resources available on campus. The occupational therapy program's social environment of the other occupational therapy students and professors positively impacted the peer mentorship process as well. P4 felt she was supported throughout the documentation process. P4 indicated that she has had no interactions with college students who are not in the occupational therapy program; therefore, this social environment had no effect on her peer mentor experience.

In order to work on the mentee's social participation P4 engaged in many different social activities with her mentee such as going to social participation events on campus, attending events the occupational therapy program hosts, and casual social activities. In order to work on the mentee's skills needed to be successful within the area of education P4 held the mentee responsible for the completion of her coursework within sessions, increased the mentee's self-direction skills, and ability to initiate activities and

tasks. Activities P4 did with the mentee in order to work on these skills were the completion of coursework, preparation for course tests, and the completion and implementation of a visual schedule. P4 also engaged in activities with the mentee that helped her structure her free time. P4 helped the mentee create cards (visual cues) that provided her with ideas of what she could be doing in her free time.

**P5:** P5 had mixed feelings and views about the peer mentorship program. She stated she thought it was a good and rewarding experience and this view was reinforced when P5 remembered why and how she helped her mentee. P5 stated she believed the program was helpful for individuals with disabilities and she wants the program to stay in existence. P5 also expressed resentment towards the peer mentorship program at times when she was very busy with school. She felt being a peer mentor was a mandatory volunteer position.

P5 indicated she believed each peer mentor's view was different about the peer mentorship program. She believed some mentors had mixed views and feelings about it like she did and others really enjoyed the program and their role as a peer mentor. She thought that every peer mentor appreciated the program, but that school was very stressful for them. P5 believed that not a lot of professors or other college students know the peer mentorship program exists; therefore, she believed they did not have an opinion about the program. She believed that when they did know about it and saw improvements within the college students with disabilities utilizing the program they appreciated it and the services it provided to individuals. P5 believed it was important for professors to know and understand an individual's disability, because not all professors understand how a developmental disability affects a person's style of learning and how

they present themselves within situations. P5 took the opportunity to educate professors about her mentee's developmental disability and how it affects her.

P5 indicated she did not receive a formal orientation when she became a peer mentor, she stated that her fellow peer provided her with a casual orientation. P5 indicated she gained support, ideas, and social events to take her mentee to from her peers during the large group weekly meetings. P5 also indicated her professor who is the peer mentor program's coordinator was a positive support throughout the peer mentorship experience. P5 engaged in multiple activities to prepare to become a peer mentor because she was worried about how her mentee would perceive her. In order to prepare P5 observed her fellow peer working with the mentee, studied the documentation materials the peer mentorship program utilized, asked fellow occupational therapy student peers about the documentation process, listened to what her peers said within the weekly meetings about activities they were doing with their mentee, and she spent the most time studying the information her professor provided about how to communicate with individuals with developmental disabilities.

When P5 was asked to describe her role as a mentor she indicated her most important role as a mentor was to help her mentee keep up with her coursework. After probing P5 indicated other roles she took on with her mentee besides the role of a mentor included the role of a friend and instructor. P5 indicated the role she took on when she worked with the other peer mentors in her group was the role of a student. P5 occasionally engaged in social participation activities such as going to basketball games, bowling, and/or engaging in casual conversations with her mentee when she took on the role of a friend. P5 indicated she was unsure whether or not she was supposed to take on

the role of a friend within this peer mentor experience. P5 believed the mentee was doing well socially because she had a boyfriend that she met in her new class. On the other hand, P5 indicated her mentee did not usually initiate conversations with people and she noticed other college students ignored or stared at her.

P5 indicated she spent the most time within the meetings helping the mentee get organized and then a majority of the time was spent on the educational activities of helping her with coursework or studying for course tests. P5 also indicated she occasionally helped the mentee develop communication skills utilized for talking to professors. P5 believed the overall goal for the peer mentorship program and services she provided as a peer mentor was to assist the mentee within the area of education.

P5 indicated the peer mentor experience did not influence or change any of her personal values and beliefs. The experience provided her with the opportunity to work with an individual with a developmental disability and taught her how to effectively communicate with this population. Even though this experience provided her with this opportunity she believed she needed to gain more experience working with individuals who have developmental disabilities. P5 indicated the peer mentor experience increased her self-awareness, taught her how to see situations and tasks from someone else's perspective, helped her empathize with individuals who have a disability, and showed her available community and campus resources. She stated these impacts benefited her both personally and as a future occupational therapist.

P5 indicated the biggest challenge was assisting her mentee with writing papers for her college courses. P5 found it difficult because the mentee had a difficult time remembering what she had to read or watch in order to write the paper; therefore, this

task took an extended amount of time. P5 also found it difficult because she did not have time to read or watch what the mentee was assigned for the paper but yet she tried to provide the mentee with cues in order to provide her with ideas of what to write about. To overcome this challenge P5 learned what was easier for the mentee and instructed the mentee to watch the assigned material when possible and to watch it close to the time of their meeting.

P5 indicated she did utilize many resources throughout her peer mentorship experience, the only one she mentioned was study rooms on campus. P5 indicated the social and physical environments of the campus positively impacted the peer mentorship process. When P5 talked about the impact of the different environments she mostly talked about how the environments affected her mentee and how her mentee really enjoyed what was available in the different environments and how this made her job as a peer mentor easier. P5 indicated the social and physical environment of the community did not impact her experience at all.

**P6:** P6 indicated the peer mentor experience was great and that she really enjoyed it. She stated it helped her within many areas of her life. P6 indicated the peer mentor experience made her values and beliefs stronger. She indicated the peer mentor experience and working with an individual who has a developmental disability was very meaningful for her because she has multiple family members who have a developmental disability and she lost a family member due to the effects of a developmental disability as well.

P6 indicated it was beneficial and helped her grow professionally to work with an individual who has a developmental disability and the experience influenced her to



appreciate individuals with developmental disabilities as well. P6 indicated this experience provided her with the opportunity to see the world from someone else's perspective, increased her self-awareness, taught her how to advocate for individuals and herself, how to find available resources, how to build rapport, developed her listening skills, increased her ability to notice subtle social cues, how to effectively manage her time, increased her organizational skills, increased her interview skills, and taught her many different activities and interventions and how to make them client-centered. P6 indicated what the experience has taught her and the opportunities it provided her with will be beneficial for her future as an occupational therapist. She indicated the experience related to her occupational therapy course material and because of this the experience helped her apply and generalize the course material and expand her personal knowledge base.

P6 indicated there was no formal orientation before she became a peer mentor. P6 wished there would have been a formal orientation that provided her with more structure and guidance when she first became a mentor. She indicated she did not purposefully engage in any activities to prepare to be a peer mentor. She stated that she already had a lot of previous experience working with individuals with developmental disabilities.

P6 viewed the peer mentorship program as a valuable resource for individuals with disabilities. P6 indicated she honestly did not know how other individuals on the college campus viewed the peer mentorship program because she only interacted with the people within the occupational therapy program.

P6 indicated a difficult part of the peer mentorship experience was keeping up with the documentation. P6 indicated she believed this was because her mentee was gone a lot which caused her peer mentor group to not be able to set up a consistent meeting schedule.

Throughout the interview P6 indicated the biggest challenge for her during this peer mentor experience was communicating with the other peer mentors within her group. Many factors influenced the frustration P6 felt about the communication barriers she faced as a peer mentor. P6 indicated that occasionally technology errors played a role in the lack of communication. P6 indicated there was a lack of communication, commitment, and effort from her other group members. P6 indicated that her group of peer mentors was too big and that this social environment negatively impacted her peer mentor experience and the peer mentorship process. In order to overcome this challenge P6 became more assertive when interacting with the other peer mentors.

P6 indicated she took on the mentor role throughout this experience. She indicated this role involved encouraging and empowering the mentee to utilize her as a resource. P6 saw herself as a resource for the mentee and as someone who could help her mentee achieve her goals and experience things within a safe environment. She stated she took on the role of a friend throughout the peer mentor experience and that this role was really important for building rapport with her mentee. P6 indicated she viewed herself as taking on a caretaker role with the mentee within the aspect of providing the mentee with a safe overall college experience. P6 stated she wanted to promote the mentee's independence and show her that she could have a college experience that encompassed education and the social participation aspects as well. She indicated within

her interactions with her mentee she utilized instructing, empathizing, and encouraging which are some of the therapeutic modes learned about within occupational therapy coursework. When working with the other peer mentors in her group P6 indicated she took on the role of an advocate for herself and her mentee.

P6 indicated she spent a majority of her time assisting her mentee within the occupational area of social participation and helped the mentee develop specific social skills as well. P6 indicated the skills her mentee had difficulty with and that she was trying to help her develop were the abilities to make decisions, divide her attention, ask questions, initiate conversations with others, advocate for herself, to be honest, and decreasing her fear of being judged by others. P6 indicated to work on these specific social skills she engaged the mentee in games and craft activities that she knew the mentee would enjoy all while she facilitated the development of these skills. To address the occupational area of social participation P6 engaged in everyday activities with her mentee such as going on walks and other bigger social events such as attending sporting events.

P6 believed coursework and education were areas she would have to assist the mentee with during the current academic semester. P6 did not trust her mentee when she told her she did not have any coursework to do and felt she should meet with the professor to discover when coursework would be assigned. P6 also indicated she was working on changing her mentee's outlook on school which was that she doesn't have to complete assignments because she was just auditing the course. P6 wanted to demonstrate that both education and social participation were important aspects of the college experience.

P6 indicated the current social environment of where she met with her mentee negatively impacted the peer mentorship process because it was a loud and busy environment which distracted the mentee. P6 indicated the social environment of the college campus was supportive of the peer mentorship experience because her mentee enjoyed attending college sporting events. P6 did wish there were more social activities to attend on campus. P6 believed the social environment of the occupational therapy program was a positive support of the peer mentorship process. P6 brought her mentee to events the program hosted and the other occupational therapy students and professors were positive social supports for both the peer mentor and the mentee.

P6 stated that because she did things inside and not outside because of the weather the physical environment did not impact the peer mentorship experience. P6 indicated the resources she utilized thus far during her peer mentorship experience were the internet, her professor, and resources available on campus. She utilized these to discover activities to engage her mentee in. She hoped to utilize her mentee's professors as resources in the future.

P6 sounded unsure whether or not the large group weekly meetings were supportive for her peer mentor experience because she indicated it was hard to give other groups feedback and her peer mentor group rarely received feedback from other peer mentors. P6 indicated the professor who was the coordinator of the peer mentorship program was at these meetings and that the advice she provided was helpful and supportive.

P6 indicated what she believed to be the main focus and rules of the peer mentorship program and the mentee's mom had the biggest impacts on the peer

mentorship process and experience. P6 believed the main focus of the peer mentorship program was education, but yet her focus for the mentee was social participation, and that all meetings and activities have to take place on the college campus. P6 indicated the inability to participate in community events negatively impacted the peer mentorship experience and the ability to integrate the mentee into the community. P6 stated the mentee's mom was the mentee's only form of transportation; therefore, their meeting and event schedule revolved around the mom's schedule. P6 indicated this occasionally negatively impacted the peer mentorship experience.

### **General Structure**

From the person perspective, peer mentors involved in a college peer mentorship program for students with disabilities described their experience as both positive and challenging. Peer mentors' interpretation of their personal experience was influenced by a) the level of personal preparation, b) opportunities to engage in meaningful occupations with the mentee, c) the ability to employ the therapeutic relationship, and d) viewing the mentee holistically. The experience of peer mentorship aided professional development as mentors expanded interpersonal skills when needing to navigate challenges. The physical and social campus environments generally supported the occupation of being a peer mentor. However, peer mentors were uncertain as to whether or not peer mentorship should occur only on the campus environment or in other environments as well. Peer mentors also expressed the need for more formal SOAR program orientation processes. Role delineation in the occupation of being a peer mentor was challenging for participants and it took time to feel comfortable engaging in the role of a peer mentor.

## **Key Constituents**

Five key constituents were exemplified throughout the individual interview summaries and supported the general structure of the overall experience of peer mentors involved in a college peer mentorship program. It is important to remember when analyzing the key constituents from the lens of the PEO model that the constituents are transactional in nature and should not be viewed separately from one another (Law et al., 1996). The five key constituents the researchers identified are the following: (a) *peer mentor's interpretation of their personal experience*, (b) *professional growth and development through the peer mentor experience*, (c) *establishing effective and collaborative communication is key*, (d) *environmental influences: physical, social, and institutional*, and (e) *delineating the role of a peer mentor*. An example of a transaction is best understood by viewing the constituent of *delineating the role of a peer mentor* in conjunction with the other four constituents. Peer mentors felt it was difficult to define their overall role; therefore, this impacted how the mentor experienced the other key constituents. The key constituent *peer mentor's interpretation of their personal experience* is interrelated with the key constituents *environmental influences: physical, social, and institutional* in addition to *delineating the role of a peer mentor* as the overall experience of the peer mentor was influenced by the environment and the occupation of being a peer mentor. Through analyzing the key constituents, the transactions amongst the person, environment, and occupation become apparent.

### **Peer Mentor's Interpretation of Their Personal Experience**

All six participants explained their feelings regarding their overall personal experience as a peer mentor as being either positive or mixed. These personal feelings

influenced the experience the peer mentor had and the way they interacted with their mentee and other individuals involved throughout the peer mentorship process. The mentor's overall attitude and effort was affected by whether or not they found the experience to be personally meaningful. Additionally, preparation for becoming a peer mentor influenced the outcome of the mentor's personal experience as it was suggested that there were variances in how mentor's prepared before working with their mentee. The mentors found engaging in occupations that were personally meaningful to their mentee had a positive impact on the mentor's experience. This lead to peer mentors experience being more positive in comparison to mentors that did not engage in meaningful occupations with their mentee. Overall, the experience of being a peer mentor impacted each of the individual participants in this study, whether it was who they were as a person or their views of individuals with disabilities.

Although preparing to be a peer mentor was not a requirement, some participants took the liberty to engage in various activities to thoroughly fulfill their role as a peer mentor. For instance, P4 indicated she researched resources on campus and further developed her communication skills before working with her mentee. P5 participated in similar activities prior to initially engaging with her mentee, but added that she observed her fellow peer working with her mentee, studied peer mentor documentation materials, and utilized communication strategies provided by her professor. P2 indicated that she considered the needs of her mentee before working with him, but did not engage in any specific activities to further prepare. When P1 was asked if she prepared for being a peer mentor she responded, "No, and that's why I feel the experience at the start was really poor", suggesting that preparing for the role of a peer mentor would have been beneficial

in enhancing her personal experience. In addition, P3 and P6 indicated they did not prepare ahead of time because both participants felt they had adequate prior personal experiences working with students in an educational setting or individuals with a developmental disability. These findings suggest that sufficient preparation for attaining the role of a peer mentor is helpful for one to fully develop into their role.

Three of the six participants described their personal feelings towards being a peer mentor as rewarding, but also a daunting and timely commitment while being a student in a graduate level program. P1 and P5 described the experience as being positive as it taught them the importance of understanding individuals from a holistic perspective which they felt will translate into establishing therapeutic rapport with clients as future occupational therapists. However, both participants indicated they faced challenges including a lack of useful support from the SOAR program. In addition to P5, P2 also felt that the time commitment of being a peer mentor was discouraging as she explained, “I’m already so busy and as a first year it’s really daunting like I already have so much to do, how am I going to do this one more thing?”, suggesting that being a peer mentor required more time than they felt they could accommodate. Although both participants felt the pressure of fulfilling this time commitment, they expressed it was still worth their time because they enjoyed observing their mentee grow and develop throughout the process.

Despite the minor challenges P3, P4, and P6 faced, all three participants expressed overall feelings of positivity related to their personal experience of being a peer mentor. P3 explained that she is a rather shy individual and does not immerse herself into the campus community often. By engaging in social participation activities



with her mentee, it not only benefitted her mentee, but enabled her to expand her comfort zone increasing her overall social exposure. P4 has worked with her same mentee for three full academic semesters and felt this increased time spent with her mentee enabled her to make strides that other groups may not have. She stated, “I think it has been really great...um I think learning and being with our same peer for the entire experience has really given us a chance to get to know her and become friends...”, suggesting that more time spent with the same mentee created a positive relationship and overall positive experience of being a peer mentor. P6 indicated this experience was personally meaningful for her because she has family members with developmental disabilities and she enjoyed seeing the growth her mentee made as a result of the services she provided. All three participants suggested that engaging in activities that were meaningful to their individual mentee not only provided personal meaning for the mentee, but was reciprocal for the mentors themselves. This suggested that engaging in activities the mentee enjoyed facilitated an overall positive experience for the mentors. It should be acknowledged that throughout the peer mentorship process, challenges did surface and mentors had to overcome them; however, a good standing relationship with the mentee, observing first-hand mentee’s growth and development, and engaging in social participation activities outweighed the challenges, creating an overall positive peer mentorship experience.

### **Professional Growth and Development Through the Peer Mentor Experience**

All of the participants indicated they grew and developed professionally in various ways through the peer mentor experience. Various skills and characteristics included: interpersonal skills, collaboration, resource identification, empathy, advocacy,

and altruism. Interpersonal skills were identified as an area of growth by four of the six participants. It should be noted that building these skills through the interactions and hands-on experience with their mentees, the participants felt that they grew both personally and professionally.

P1 and P4 expressed they developed professional interpersonal skills through communication with their mentee's professor. At times, the participants felt it was challenging to communicate the needs of their mentee to the professor as they felt the professor was unaware of how a developmental disability affects an individual; therefore, they felt the professor was unable to appropriately accommodate. P4 further explained how her interpersonal skills have developed through interacting with her mentee's professor by stating, "...first it was awkward but then as you do it more and more it is so natural and you could just spout off what exactly you are there for, how you are doing it, and then it was kinda nice because you can kind of build that connection between your mentee and their professor...", implying that building interpersonal skills is a process, but necessary for effective professional communication. In addition, P3 and P6 expressed that communicating with the other peer mentors in their group helped them develop interpersonal skills. Both participants indicated formal and informal communication were necessary to facilitate a collaborative team approach amongst group members. Through working in a group, the participants felt they became more assertive with their communication abilities. P3 and P6 alluded that developing assertive and effective communication will be beneficial working on a future healthcare team. Similarly, P1 and P4 felt the development and utilization of interpersonal skills throughout the peer mentorship process will be helpful for them as future occupational therapists.

Collaboration was identified as a professional skill four of the six participants utilized throughout their experience as a peer mentor. P1, P2, P3, and P4 all expressed that collaborating with their group members and their mentees facilitated respectable working and personal relationships. Effective communication was a pivotal aspect of collaborating with others throughout the peer mentorship process. All four of the participants felt that effective communication amongst group members facilitated a cohesive approach to the peer mentorship process; nonetheless, this did not occur at all times, making collaborating difficult and causing confusion. P4 further explained that being around the same age as her mentee was an initial difficult aspect of their relationship as she was hesitant to be assertive with her mentee in fear of negatively affecting their relationship. This posed initial barriers, but over time as their relationship grew she felt more comfortable collaborating with her mentee while still providing structural guidance. These findings show that many components affect the ability to successfully collaborate with others and sustain a team approach throughout the peer mentorship process.

Five of the six participants identified utilizing resource identification and advocacy skills throughout their experience as a peer mentor. P3, P4, P5, and P6 initially were unfamiliar with the available resources on campus; therefore, the participants had to discover accessible resources pertinent to activities they would be engaging in with their mentee. This finding demonstrates the translatability to future practice as an occupational therapist as it is essential to be familiar with the available resources within one's community. P2, P3, and P6 indicated that being an advocate for their mentee as well as themselves played a huge role in the peer mentorship process. P3 identified that

self-advocacy was a skill she focused on with her mentee and realized through this experience that advocacy is an important aspect of everyone's life. These findings indicate that resource identification and advocacy complement each other in the professional world as skills needed to be an effective health care provider.

The power of empathy was a common theme throughout the participant's responses. All six participants felt that this experience enabled them to view the life of someone with a developmental disability from an empathetic perspective. P4 and P5 indicated the peer mentor experience provided them with the opportunity to see situations from someone else's perspective, specifically their mentee. This suggests that viewing all aspects of someone's life from various perspectives promotes the development of empathy for future use as an occupational therapist. Empathy is a therapeutic skill used by occupational therapists to build rapport, collaborate, and provide successful therapeutic services from a holistic approach.

The experience of being a peer mentor was described as being eye opening, valuable, and beneficial caring for someone other than themselves for P1, P2, P4, and P6. These descriptions articulate the concept of altruism. When illustrating this concept, P1 further explained her personal experience as, "caring for somebody and helping someone out that I didn't even know, not even a year ago," suggesting that meeting a new person and building an altruistic connection is possible. Both P1 and P6 felt they assumed the role of a caretaker when promoting a positive experience for their mentee; fulfilling this role by assisting their mentee to achieve their goals and independence within the college experience. When asked how the experience of being a peer mentor impacted P2 personally, she responded by saying that it has overall been an eye opening experience

for her and illustrated, "...it's a really great way to be able to practice altruism like in your own community while also being able to apply the skills you've learned from that and apply it to your future practice". In addition, P4 responded to a similar question stating, "That a little bit of effort is so meaningful to other people and I think that really like after reflecting on it that it just kind of makes me realize that you don't have to do a lot, just a little". This statement, contrary to what one may think, suggests that putting a large amount of effort was not mandatory in order to care for someone in an altruistic way. Overall, the experience of being a peer mentor promoted the growth and development of professional skills needed to be an effective peer mentor and foreshadowed the necessary skills mentors will use as future occupational therapists.

### **Establishing Effective and Collaborative Communication is Key**

It is important to note that communication played a dynamic role in the peer mentorship process and interacts with many of the constituents in this study. Responses from participants suggested that communication both facilitated and created challenges for peer mentors throughout their experience; therefore, the researchers felt it was appropriate to include communication as a sole key constituent. All six of the participants reflected on communication in various degrees and noted that it was a foundation in building relationships and overcoming obstacles throughout the mentorship process.

Four of the six participants indicated that ineffective communication created challenges with the other peer mentors in their groups. Not establishing a consistent form of communication amongst group members was noted by P1, P2, P3, and P6. These participants noted that this aspect of the peer mentorship process created obstacles the

peer mentor's had to overcome. P3 and P6 illustrated that communicating with their mentee was not a significant challenge, instead they found effectively communicating and working with the other peer mentors in their individual groups was the biggest challenge. When asked to describe a specific challenge faced throughout P3's peer mentor experience, she responded, "...it's been more challenging learning how to communicate with the other people in our group, like the other mentors, just because we're all so busy and we're all running around and making sure we're on the same page...". Similarly, P6 responded to the same question stating, "I think the hardest part with peer mentorship is communicating with your other team members actually...and so it's just hard communicating with your other team members and trying to get on the same page or know that you are on separate pages but you work on different things". These responses demonstrate that effective communication and utilizing a collaborative approach are important when working with others, whether it be in a peer mentor group or on a healthcare team.

In addition to communicating with other peer mentors, participants also felt communicating with their mentee was difficult at times. P1, P2, P4, and P5 all indicated that communicating with their mentee created obstacles and they had to learn strategies and techniques to overcome them. P1, P2, and P5 expressed that they did not have any prior experience working with an individual with a developmental disability; therefore, they did not know what to expect or how to communicate effectively with their mentee during the initial stages of peer mentorship. As the peer mentor process progressed, all three participants acknowledged that their communication with their mentees improved through the use of a trial and error approach.

All six of the participants illustrated their overall communication skills improved throughout the peer mentorship experience. P1, P2, and P4 acknowledged asking open-ended questions to their mentee at first, but then realized this was not an effective means of communication as it caused confusion and misunderstanding. P2 further explained, “...I had no idea that I shouldn’t ask like who, what, where, when, how questions...I mean as we went along we started to figure it out...”, demonstrating that the process of developing communication skills through a trial and error approach helped P2 better understand her mentee and how to accommodate to effectively communicate with them, promoting professional growth. Furthermore, P3 discussed how communicating with others impacted her professional growth and overall experience as a peer mentor by stating, “...learning how to communicate professionally and interact with other professionals, um and with families and even these individuals will be really helpful for me as I move into practice”. Participants’ responses suggested that by building skills and developing pivotal relationships, communication posed barriers as well as facilitated professional growth for becoming future occupational therapists.

### **Environmental Influences: Physical, Social, and Institutional**

There were numerous aspects of the peer mentor’s environment that had an impact on their overall experience. Researchers asked interview questions pertaining to various environments that encompass the peer mentorship as indicated by the literature. Environmental aspects identified in this study included: physical, social, and institutional. The researchers felt that it was important to identify all of the environmental aspects of the peer mentor experience because they either provided support, influenced peer

mentor's overall experience, and/or impacted how the peer mentors perceived their ability to use their environment.

P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5 discussed how the physical environment of the college campus supported their overall experience as a peer mentor. When asked how the physical environment impacted her experience, P4 stated: "I would say a positive impact. It's nice having the free range to use whatever we need without having to worry about anything...", suggesting the physical environment had suitable resources available at her convenience. However, P1 and P3 indicated that being unfamiliar with the college campus due to being first year students made it initially difficult when having to utilize the physical environment as a resource. It was interpreted by the researchers that some of the participants were unsure whether or not they were able to engage in activities outside of the college campus, limiting the occupations they thought they were able to work on with their mentee. P6 further validated this concept by saying, "It has to be something associated within the campus...I think it restricts a lot of our ability to have them, um integrate into the community because it's just school focused...", this statement illustrated the confusion of the guidelines for being a peer mentor. P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5 did not allude to the fact that they were restricted to staying on the college campus with their mentee; however, none of the participants ventured out into the community and engaged in activities off-campus.

The social environment either positively or negatively affected peer mentors experience. Some participants indicated positive social supports as being their peers and professors, campus social events, and the SOAR program. On the other hand, other participants felt these supports negatively impacted their social environment and overall



experience. One specific example of the social environment negatively impacting the peer mentorship process was that social events were only offered at certain times. P1 indicated that this caused scheduling conflicts; therefore, they were unable to attend events that her mentee wanted to attend. In addition, P6 and P3 identified that certain on-campus locations they chose to meet with their mentees and loud social events posed barriers at times because they were distracting to the mentee. This created challenges when building rapport with their mentee and promoting focus and attention on the task at hand.

P1, P3, P4, P5, and P6 discussed how they felt very few individuals on campus fully understood their role as a peer mentor and the SOAR program as a whole. Participants indicated that individuals and institutional services on campus generally seemed to be unaware of the SOAR program and the services they can provide. Specific individuals or institutional services included disability services, professors, college students on campus, and even other occupational therapy students in the program. Participants felt that they had to explain their role and the services they provide to both other individuals and institutional services. Even after their explanation, mentors felt their role was still not fully understood. When describing a specific example of meeting a mentee's professor for the first time, P4 felt that her role was not understood by the professor. She expressed frustration and stated, "I think they are like that's a really nice thing you are doing, but I don't think they fully understand the meaning of what we do and how much it helps these people and these certain populations", implying that her services and the SOAR program in general seem to be unknown.

Despite the negative aspects of the social environment described by participants, positive aspects were also identified. Campus social events were described as a main opportunity for engaging in social participation with their mentees by P3, P4, P5 and P6. When asked to describe the impact the campus social environment had on P4's overall experience, she positively stated, "I think it made our jobs a little easier because one of our big things was social participation...", indicating that the social environment facilitated her ability to work towards goals specific to her mentee. It was noted that being involved in the SOAR program encouraged participants, specifically P3 and P6, to become more aware and interactive with the campus community. When asked whether or not P3's involvement level in the campus community has changed since being a part of the SOAR program she stated, "I would say yes because I have no idea what's going on around campus at all and being involved in this program has forced me to look into those things and be more aware of what's happening", indicating that being a peer mentor has increased her overall social exposure on campus in a positive way. In addition, P2, P4 and P5 discussed how their peers were a main source of support throughout their peer mentorship experience. Participant's peers provided them with feedback, a common ground for relatability, efficiency for getting tasks done, and an overall resource throughout the process. Overall, the campus social environment influenced the peer mentorship process both positively and negatively.

The researchers understood that the social and institutional environments influenced one another and the overall experience of being a peer mentor, but the SOAR program was a key institutional environment the peer mentors interacted with; therefore, the researchers felt it was important to portray participant's feelings about this specific

environment. All participants talked about various positive aspects of the SOAR program which included the professors, other occupational therapy students, and social events held by the program. When describing the supportive nature of the institutional environment, P4 indicated, "...our program was really helpful because either if we didn't have anything to do or if we were coming through the building or she came to a potluck or our department; everybody in our program was so supportive...", showing that the SOAR program, in addition to the occupational therapy program, provided a source of support for both the mentor and the mentee throughout the process. In addition, P2 indicated the advisor professor of the SOAR program provided her with guidance throughout the process. When talking about the influence the advisor professor had on the overall mentorship process, she stated, "...the professor is obviously the biggest support because a) she just has so much knowledge especially with working with like adolescents and kids and b) especially developmental disabilities that's her thing so like definitely she's a big support".

Although there were aspects of the SOAR program that positively influenced the participants experience, P1, P2, P4, P5, and P6 indicated that the lack of a formal orientation process negatively impacted aspects of their peer mentorship experience. When P2 was asked to describe her personal experience as a peer mentor, she began the conversation by stating, "I wish there would have been kind of more information because like ok I knew I was getting this participant and I knew his diagnosis. I haven't had a lot of experience with that population so it was kind of foreign going into it...", indicating the lack of basic knowledge and support she received at the beginning of the process had an effect on her overall personal experience as a mentor. Furthermore, P4 had similar

beliefs regarding the initial process of the peer mentor experience by indicating, "...we were kind of just thrown into it and it was a sink or swim kind of thing. The first year I felt like it was a lot of feeling it out or winging it...". Another aspect of the SOAR program that had negative effects on mentors overall experience were the large SOAR group meetings. P1, P4, P5, and P6 felt that they were not as beneficial and supportive as they would have liked. When describing what occurs at these meetings, P1 stated, "we say what's kind of been going on and then, um the professor is there and then we talk about things that we could work on. But, it's just kind of like almost too casual", suggesting that she would have benefitted from more structured meetings that provided further detail and guidance. In summary, the institutional environment facilitated or inhibited personal growth, overall support, and the participant's interpretation of their personal experience.

### **Delineating the Role of a Peer Mentor**

Throughout analyzing the individual interview summaries, it was determined by the researchers that it was difficult for participants to define their role as a peer mentor throughout all aspects of the mentorship process. Therefore, the researchers felt that it was important to analyze this constituent to describe the overall occupation of being a peer mentor. The identified components of the occupation of being a peer mentor included: (a) various roles mentors assumed, (b) confusion navigating the role of a peer mentor, and (c) the time it took to feel comfortable and confident in their role. The main occupations that all of the participants worked on with their mentees included education and social participation. One participant, P2 indicated an additional area of occupation she focused on with her mentee was work; however, she was the only participant to

address this area of occupation. These responses suggest that the participants were not focusing on the broad scope of the college experience, instead they mainly addressed two areas of occupation from a wide range of potential occupations. This finding illustrates the participants may have been confused about their role as a peer mentor and the areas of occupation they could address with their mentee. In addition, this finding may suggest participants focused on areas of occupation that were meaningful or prioritized by their mentee, limiting the areas of occupation explored.

A common theme throughout the responses of P1, P2, P4, P5, and P6 was that it was challenging to define what their role as a peer mentor was in addition to explaining their services to others. When discussing how the SOAR program was generally under recognized within the college community, P1 identified that it was difficult to communicate and define what her role as a peer mentor was to others by stating, “I don’t really know how you could really advertise for SOAR with like the proper way to word what we actually do”. In addition, P5 felt confusion when defining what she could do within her role as a peer mentor and indicated, “...I think they want us to mainly say our scope is as a student and not try to be OTs really yet... so it’s usually just trying to help them with their school work and um maybe communicate with teachers and things like that...”. This suggests P5 felt she was limited in the areas of occupation she could address with her mentee; therefore, she primarily focused on education instead of the overall college experience. Various roles were assumed throughout the peer mentorship process including being an instructor, peer, mother-figure, and coach. This finding infers that acquiring various roles throughout the process may have led to participants having difficulty defining their overall role as a peer mentor.

The role of an instructor was assumed by P1, P2, P4, and P5 during the peer mentorship process. The main area of occupation participants addressed with their mentee within this role was education. When asked to describe the role of a peer mentor, P1 indicated she primarily worked on school-related tasks with her mentee and stated, “...I wish I could be kind of more as a peer. I feel like we are put in a position where we have to be more bossy with her”, suggesting that it is difficult to assume the role of a peer and she felt that using an instructing approach when focusing on educational activities with her mentee was more appropriate. Although P1 did not feel that she portrayed the role of a peer in her relationship, P3, P4, P5, and P6 all indicated they felt they provided the support of a peer or friend for their mentee. P6 further described her role of being a friend by stating, “I think to truly connect with your mentees you have to connect to them on a certain level...For me I’ve gotten really close to my SOAR participant and she tells us about her life..”, suggesting this role was pertinent in order to build rapport and a positive relationship with her mentee. When P5 was describing the roles she assumed as a peer mentor she stated, “...I don’t know if we are supposed to do this but I kind of try to be her friend...”, demonstrating the confusion of what her role of a peer mentor entailed. Overall, the roles of both being an instructor and a peer enveloped the overall role of being a peer mentor.

The role of a caretaker was also expressed by some of the participants, specifically P1, P4, and P6, as their responses portrayed a deep level of care for their mentee due to the desire for wanting them to succeed. When portraying how P1 assumed this role, she indicated, “I feel like you kind of are like in the mothering role...you have to get on her all the time and be like ok make sure you do this”, implying that she cared

enough for her mentee to check-up on her and ensure that she was taking the necessary steps to achieve her goals. Throughout the peer mentorship process, P2 and P6 felt that they highly encouraged their mentee as they also wanted them to succeed. This role could be defined as that of a coach or a caretaker.

Due to having difficulty defining the overall role of a peer mentor, P1, P2, P4, P5, and P6 felt that it took time to feel comfortable in their role. P1 described that she did not feel comfortable at the beginning of the process for various reasons, but felt this lack of comfort negatively impacted her mentee. Specifically, P1 mentioned how she felt she was did not fulfill her role as a peer mentor by stating, "...we felt like we let her down because it did take us so long to realize like what is going on", indicating that P1's initial confusion about what her role was as a mentor affected her relationship with her mentee. Lack of orientation and structure, a vague understanding of the SOAR program from an outsider's perspective, assuming multiple roles, and focusing on limited occupations all influenced participants confusion related to their ability to define the overall role of a peer mentor. Being able to define roles, whether it is being a student, peer mentor, or an occupational therapist, provides a foundation for fulfilling and ensuring successful execution of the identified role.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **DISCUSSION, SUMMARY, AND CONCLUSIONS**

This chapter includes a rich discussion of the qualitative findings of the study in conjunction with the relevant literature. A summary of the research conducted and a conclusion of the findings will be presented. Implications the researchers found in addition to recommendations for the Student Organization for Accessibility and Resources (SOAR) program will be discussed. Recommendations and limitations of the study will be presented.

#### **Qualitative Data Analysis Discussion**

The overall purpose of this study was to gain a thorough understanding of the experience of being a peer mentor in a postsecondary peer mentorship program. Through the use of Giorgi and Giorgi's (2008) phenomenological approach, the researchers gained knowledge from six peer mentors in the SOAR program pertaining to: (a) the occupation of being a peer mentor, (b) the environmental influences that impacted mentors experiences, and (c) personal factors that impacted the mentors overall experience.

Prior to interviewing the participants, the researchers did a thorough review of the existing literature regarding postsecondary peer mentorship programs. The researchers found that there was limited research pertaining to postsecondary peer mentorship programs. However, the researchers identified that postsecondary peer mentorship programs that were discussed in the literature looked at various perspectives of the programs, including those of the mentees, the mentors, or both. Of the existing literature,



only two of the six articles solely studied the perspective of the peer mentor; therefore, a need to further explore and understand the experience from a peer mentor perspective was determined (Farley, Gibbons, & Cihak, 2014; Giust & Valle-Riestra, 2016).

Peer mentorship programs are a natural fit for the occupational therapy profession. A majority of the issues experienced by students with disabilities are occupational in nature, coinciding with the overall focus of peer mentorship programs in addressing the many occupations of the college experience and helping students become self-reliant adults within the community (Jones & Goble, 2012; O'Brien et al., 2009). Difficulties individuals with disabilities experience include: (a) independent living skills, (b) community participation, (c) employment, and (d) engagement in everyday roles, habits, and routines (Kardos & White, 2005). The SOAR program consists of occupational therapy students who volunteer to be peer mentors for college students with disabilities (Morrison & Hanson, 2016). Previous research has not been completed on the SOAR program, making this study unique and the first of its kind for a peer mentorship program consisting solely of mentors who are occupational therapy students. The researchers acknowledged there is an additional program, the Bridge Program, which utilizes occupational therapy students as mentors, but the program only focuses on education and vocation training (Gutman, Kerner, Zombek, Dulek, & Ramsey, 2009). The SOAR peer mentorship program assists individuals with disabilities navigate through the overall college experience setting it apart from the other programs identified in the review of the literature (Gutman et al., 2009). The overall experience of peer mentors in the SOAR program was supported by the following key constituents: (a) peer mentor's interpretation of their personal experience, (b) professional growth and development

through the peer mentor experience, (c) establishing effective and collaborative communication is key, (d) environmental influences: physical, social, and institutional, and (e) delineating the role of a peer mentor.

Five overall key constituents were formed throughout the analysis of peer mentors interview responses. The first constituent *peer mentor's interpretation of their personal experience* was supported by participant's report of personal preparation, the use of meaningful activities, and overcoming obstacles faced throughout the process. The second constituent *professional growth and development through the peer mentor experience* was represented through the peer mentor's development of skills including interpersonal skills, empathy, advocacy, and resource identification. The third constituent *establishing effective and collaborative communication is key* was illustrated through peer mentors discussion of the challenges they faced, the facilitation of relationships, and the development of communication skills used in a professional work environment. The fourth constituent *environmental influences: physical, social, and institutional* was emphasized through the identified support of the physical and social campus environments, in addition to the institutional environment of the SOAR program. Lastly, the fifth constituent *delineating the role of a peer mentor* highlighted the occupations mentors addressed, their comfort and confidence in the role of a peer mentor, and the various roles they assumed throughout the process.

### **Discussion of Findings**

Consistent with the findings, both the mentee and the mentor benefitted from the peer mentor relationship (Burgstahler & Crawford, 2007; Farley et al., 2014; Jones & Goble, 2012). The majority of the participants in the current study indicated the

experience was personally meaningful for them. Peer mentors discussed that when they engaged in activities that were personally meaningful to their mentee, mentors were able to see their mentee grow and develop in a positive way illustrating an overall meaningful experience for both the mentee and the mentor. A similar finding in the literature that held true for the current study was that engaging in the occupation of social participation encouraged both the mentee and the mentor to expand their social exposure, creating friendships (Farley et al., 2014; Giust & Valle-Riestra, 2016; Jones & Goble, 2012). This was a benefit for both the mentee and the mentor as social participation is a fundamental aspect of the overall college experience whether the individual has a disability or is a typical student (O'Brien et al., 2009). Lastly, an identified benefit of the peer mentorship relationship in the literature and for the participants in the SOAR program was that mentors became more open-minded at the end of the process, facilitating an accepting and holistic relationship with their mentee (Farley et al., 2014; Wilson, Bialk, Freeze, Freeze, & Lutfiyya, 2012).

Personal and professional growth were attained throughout the peer mentorship process for mentors in the SOAR program which further supports early findings regarding the benefits of peer mentorship programs (Farley et al., 2014; Giust & Valle-Riestra, 2016; Jones & Goble, 2012). One professional skill identified by both participants in the current study and in the previous studies was the use of interpersonal skills to help the mentors understand and interact with individuals involved in the peer mentorship process (Farley et al., 2014). Advocacy was illustrated as being an important aspect of professional development as mentors evolved to be self-advocates not only for their mentees, but for themselves (Farley et al., 2014; Giust & Valle-Riestra, 2016).

Contrary to what the researchers found in the literature, resource identification was a skill that some mentors in the current study felt they developed throughout the process to fulfill their role as a peer mentor. This could be further explained by resource identification being a core principle of the SOAR program; whereas, research in previous studies did not establish resource identification as a skill mentors developed throughout the mentorship process (Morrison, 2016b). The ability to understand the mentee from various perspectives and grow individually as a mentor was described as an enriching experience for the mentors throughout the peer mentorship process (Farley et al., 2014; Jones & Goble, 2012). In the current study, because the mentors were occupational therapy students, developing the skill of utilizing empathy facilitates therapeutic relationships mentors will develop with future clients as a healthcare provider. Participants in the SOAR program identified that being empathetic assisted them in growing both personally and professionally, suggesting this skill is essential for building rapport and being able to view individuals from a holistic perspective.

Another positive benefit of the peer mentor relationship identified in previous studies and in the current study was that lasting friendships were formed throughout the process (Farley et al., 2014; Giust & Valle-Riestra, 2016; Jones & Goble, 2012; O'Brien et al., 2009). Participants in the current study indicated that connecting with their mentee on a personal level helped them to engage in the role of a friend, which they felt was rewarding. Jones and Goble (2012) identified that forming trust, open communication, and a friendship outside of the academic environment was essential for a successful peer mentor relationship. This held true for the current study as well as mentors described

communication and getting to know their mentee on a deeper level provided a personally meaningful mentorship experience outside of solely working on school-related tasks.

The previous studies identified similar findings to the current study in regards to mentors feeling that a more formal orientation process would have been beneficial for further support throughout their experience (Giust & Valle-Riestra, 2016; Jones & Goble, 2012; Wilson et al., 2012). Mentors in both previous and the current study indicated the lack of a formal orientation process impacted mentors negatively as they felt they were unprepared to work with their mentee (Giust & Valle-Riestra, 2016; Jones & Goble, 2012). From the perspective of mentees, Wilson et al. (2012) indicated the unpreparedness of the mentors also negatively impacted them as they felt they had to teach their mentors about their learning style. This finding discussed in the previous studies could be further explained as the participants in the SOAR program felt they utilized a trial and error approach, resulting in mentors feeling like they let down their mentees. Mentors in the current study in addition to those in previous studies, felt that they could have benefitted from being educated on interpersonal strategies through a formal orientation process to overcome communication barriers faced when working with their mentees as well (Giust & Valle-Riestra, 2016).

Communication was identified as a key component of the peer mentorship process by peer mentors in the SOAR program as well as the literature (Jones & Goble, 2012). Some mentors in both studies felt that when open communication with their mentee and other peer mentors was established, it facilitated positive relationships (Jones & Goble, 2012). Although communication was identified as a key component for formulating relationships, some mentors in the current and previous studies identified that

communication created challenges. Mentors indicated that a lack of communication and commitment from other peer mentors was frustrating; subsequently inhibiting a teach approach to the peer mentorship process (Jones & Goble, 2012). Communication either facilitated or inhibited a team approach to the peer mentorship process. Mentors in the SOAR program and previous studies indicated that professors and campus supports were unaware of the peer mentor programs; therefore, effective communication and collaboration was necessary, but not always attained (Jones & Goble, 2012).

Although there were several similarities between previous studies reviewed and the current study being researched, differences were also apparent. Mentors in the SOAR program engaged in on-campus activities only as some participants thought they were not allowed to leave campus with their mentee. This could be explained by mentors having a difficult time delineating their role as a mentor and the occupations they addressed throughout the mentorship process. However, in the Giust and Valle-Riestra (2016) study, mentors indicated they engaged in off-campus activities as well as activities on campus and felt that the engagement and exposure created a more authentic relationship with their mentee. Participants in the current study felt if they were able to take their mentee off campus, it would have helped them to increase their mentees community exposure for successful college integration.

Giust and Valle-Riestra (2016) identified a lack of commitment from mentees created a challenging environment for the mentors and caused frustration. Conversely, the participants in the current research study did not indicate a lack of commitment from their mentees, instead some of the mentors illustrated that a lack of commitment from other peer mentors was the biggest challenge they faced. From these findings, it is

suggested that commitment from both mentees and other peer mentors is supportive of a positive peer mentor experience.

Throughout the review of the literature, it was determined that mentors consisted of various undergraduate and graduate student volunteers. The mentors in the Giust and Valle-Riestra (2016) study included students pursuing various majors, specifically special education, biology, hospitality, nursing, and psychology. Jones and Goble (2012) incorporated mentors in their study from varying majors as well, including music education and special education. Mentors that participated in the Farley et al. (2014) study were individuals pursuing special education, psychology, and therapeutic recreation degrees. Burgstahler and Crawford (2007) conducted a study using e-mentoring to facilitate peer mentorship, but did not fully explain who their mentors consisted of. It was identified in the O'Brien et al. (2009) study that the foundation of the peer mentor program they studied utilized occupational therapy and speech language students as mentors, but the focus of the study was from the mentees perspective. None of the above peer mentorship programs within the literature exclusively utilized occupational therapy students as peer mentors. As indicated previously, occupational therapy is a natural fit for peer mentorship programs; therefore, the researchers were curious as to why the current study was the first of its kind to focus on the perspective of peer mentors from an occupational therapy standpoint.

### **Conclusion/Recommendations**

This study aimed to understand the experience of peer mentors in a postsecondary peer mentorship program for students with disabilities. The current study also aimed to formulate a greater understanding of the SOAR program as this is the first study

conducted on this specific peer mentorship program. Strengths and areas of growth were identified to enhance the overall experience of peer mentors involved in the SOAR program.

The current study found that overall peer mentors benefitted from the hands-on experience working with individuals with disabilities through the SOAR program. In addition, various personal aspects of the peer mentor, their environments, and the occupation of being a peer mentor both positively and negatively impacted mentors overall experiences. An overarching theme throughout the current study was that mentors had a difficult time defining what their role necessitated; therefore, they felt uncomfortable and confused at times. Peer mentors in the SOAR program felt that not having a formal orientation process negatively impacted their experience as a peer mentor and the services they provided. The lack of awareness by various individuals within the college community also impacted the peer mentors experience as it created communication challenges between the mentor and other individual and institutional supports. Mentors indicated communication was an overall challenge of peer mentorship and felt they could have benefitted from education pertaining to interpersonal skills to overcome obstacles they faced throughout the experience.

In order to enhance the overall understanding of the role of a peer mentor in the SOAR program, it is recommended that a formal orientation process take place prior to mentors working with their mentee. This would help eliminate confusion and give mentors a greater understanding and level of confidence to successfully fulfill their role as a peer mentor. During this orientation process, educating peer mentors on effective communication strategies and interpersonal skills training would also be beneficial to aid



mentors in overcoming communication challenges. Due to the responses from peer mentors indicating the purpose of the SOAR program is not sufficiently understood by the college community, it is recommended that strategies to increase the overall awareness of the SOAR program be implemented. Lastly, peer mentors indicated the most beneficial aspect of the peer mentorship process was being able to work hands-on with individuals with disabilities; therefore, this should continue to be a core focus of the SOAR program. Further research should be conducted from a quantitative standpoint to further explore the understanding of the current findings. It is suggested that further research be completed to better understand the role of occupational therapy in the transition process for students with disabilities pursuing postsecondary education to better understand this potential emerging area of practice.

### **Limitations**

Several limitations in this study should be considered for the conduction of further research regarding this topic of interest. Through the review of the literature, limited research exists pertaining to the experience of mentors in postsecondary peer mentorship programs. Direct limitations of this study include the small sample of six participants, the convenience sampling method used, and interviewing participants from a single peer mentorship program; consequently, limiting the transferability of the results. Due to the qualitative nature of this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted by both researchers, influencing the reliability. Lastly, researcher biases pose a limitation to this study as the researchers are occupational therapy students; therefore, this may have influenced the results of the study and the responses from participants. Increasing the sample size of the study, expanding the geographical region reached, implementing a

randomized sampling method, and utilizing interviewers that do not have occupational therapy backgrounds could enhance the exploration of these findings.

## APPENDICES

## Appendix A Interview Protocol

Thank you for being willing to participate in our study regarding peer mentors' experience in the SOAR program. I have several questions that I would like to ask you. This interview will take approximately one hour to complete. Do you have any questions about the informed consent you were given? By participating in this interview, you are giving verbal consent to be a participant in this study. Are you in agreement to participate?

Before we begin the interview, I would like you to know that at any point throughout the interview if you have questions or concerns please let me know. You can stop the interview at any point.

To start the interview, I will need to ask you a few questions regarding your history about being a peer mentor. This will not be recorded on a digital audio recorder.

- What year in the occupational therapy program are you?
- What gender do you identify with?
- How many years have you been a peer mentor?
- How many mentees have you worked with?

Thank you for answering those questions. I will now transition to questions pertaining to your personal peer mentor experience. I will now begin recording the interview.

### **Person**

1. Tell me about your personal experience as a peer mentor.
  - Cognitive factors:
    - Describe a specific challenge you faced during your peer mentorship experience and how you overcame it?
  - Affective factors:
    - How has this experience impacted you personally? Professionally?
    - Has being a peer mentor influenced your values and beliefs?
  - Spirituality factors:
    - What meaning did this experience have for you?

**Environment:** Now we are going to transition to talk about the environment where you completed your peer mentorship.

2. Describe for me how you have been supported throughout the peer mentorship process. (orientation, team meetings, faculty advisor collaborations, progress documentation)
  - Culture:
    - How do you personally view the SOAR program?
    - How do you think others view the SOAR program?
  - Institutional/socioeconomic:
    - What resources have you utilized throughout your experience thus far as a peer mentor? (Socioeconomic or institutional i.e. SOAR/Casper College resources)
  - Physical:
    - What impact has the physical environment had on the peer mentorship process?
  - Social:

- What role has the social environment played throughout the peer mentorship process?

**Occupation:** Now we are going to talk about the occupation of being a peer mentor and the related activities and roles.

3. Describe for me activities/tasks that you engaged in to prepare for your role as a peer mentor.
  - How would you describe your role as a mentor?
  - While your primary role was being a peer mentor, did you take on other roles throughout the peer mentorship process? (with the mentee or other peer mentors)
4. What types of activities did you engage in with your mentee?
5. As we conclude this interview, how do you think being a peer mentor will influence you as an occupational therapist?

**Conclusion:**

I would like to thank you once again for your participation in this interview and your contributions in this study. I will be in contact with you via email within one month to review the transcribed version of this interview. At that point, I will ask you to look over the transcribed interview and ask that you make any changes you see fit to provide further insight on the data collected. Once your interview is analyzed, I will email you the analysis for your review. I also want to inform you that your identity will remain confidential throughout this study. Thank you for assisting me in learning more about your experience as a peer mentor.

## Appendix B Consent Form

1

### THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH DAKOTA CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

**TITLE:** The Experience of Peer Mentors within a Peer Mentor Post-Secondary Transition Program

**PROJECT DIRECTOR:** Carissa Birchem and Mikayla Greely, *Advisor Sarah Nielsen, PhD, OTR/L, Sue Morrison, MS, OTR/L*

**PHONE #** (701) 777-2208

**DEPARTMENT:** Occupational Therapy Department

#### STATEMENT OF RESEARCH

A person who is to participate in the research must give his or her informed consent to such participation. This consent must be based on an understanding of the nature and risks of the research. This document provides information that is important for this understanding. Research projects include only subjects who choose to take part. Please take your time in making your decision as to whether to participate. If you have questions at any time, please ask.

#### WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

You are invited to be in a research study about the experience of peer mentors within a peer mentor post-secondary transition program; specifically, the SOAR program and because of your affiliation with this program and because you are a peer mentor in the program.

The purpose of this research study is to understand your experience as a peer mentor working with post-secondary students with disabilities within the SOAR program. Data will be gathered through a phenomenological interview method. The interview will focus on your personal experience, the environment where activities with your mentee(s) took place, resources utilized, views of the SOAR program, and the occupation of being a peer mentor. We anticipate the findings to be a better understanding of a peer mentor's roles and occupations within a peer mentor post-secondary transition program. We also hope to better understand the educational experience of a peer mentor and the future educational needs of peer mentors working with post-secondary students with disabilities.

#### HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL PARTICIPATE?

Approximately 6 people will take part in this study at the University of North Dakota. The interview portion of this study will be conducted via FaceTime or Skype.

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### HOW LONG WILL I BE IN THIS STUDY?

Your participation in the study will occur over approximately 6 months (December 2016-June 2017). You will need to participate in one interview utilizing either FaceTime or Skype at a location of your choice, further participation will occur via email for transcription review and member checking. The interview will take about 60 minutes to complete, transcription review and member checking will take an additional 30 minutes for each review.

### WHAT WILL HAPPEN DURING THIS STUDY?

The researchers will conduct six semi-structured interviews with participants. Interview questions will focus on the peer mentors' personal experiences, the environment where activities with the mentee(s) take place, resources utilized, views of the SOAR program, and the occupation of being a peer mentor. Researchers will use audio recording during interviews to collect data. Following interviews, the researchers will transcribe the audio digital record of the interview verbatim. To protect the privacy of the participants' interviews, names will not be used in the transcribed data. Transcribed data will not be stored with the demographic data obtained from the participant. The researcher will assign a pseudonym to each participant to maintain confidentiality. Only the researchers will be knowledgeable to the assigned pseudonym used in order to connect data to that specific participant. Transcription and coding of the interviews will take place in a private room in the University of North Dakota School of Medicine and Health Sciences or within the private residence of the researchers. The transcription of the interviews will be stored on researchers' personal computers under a password protected file. Once the interviews are transcribed the interview audio recording will be destroyed. Transcribed interviews will be sent to participants for member checking review. Consent from participants will be given verbally, therefore no tangible forms will need to be stored. All research data including individual interview transcriptions, data analysis, and demographic data must be maintained for at least 3 years after the research study has ended. Until the study has concluded the information will be stored on a password protected computer owned by the researchers; at the end of the study the interview transcriptions, data analysis, and demographic information will be printed and stored in Professor Sarah Nielsen's locked office. The electronic copies will then be destroyed after they have been printed, and the data analysis will be kept for use in the final report.

Participation will include one interview utilizing either FaceTime or Skype at a location of your choice, further participation will occur via email for transcription review and member checking. The interview will take about 60 minutes to complete, transcription review and member checking will take an additional 30 minutes for each review. During the interview participants are free to skip any questions they would prefer not to answer.

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### **WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF THE STUDY?**

The anticipated risks for participation in this study are minimal. Participants could feel uncomfortable sharing about their peer mentor experiences. However, the participant is made aware that at any point, should he or she feel uncomfortable, they can end the interview.

### **WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF THIS STUDY?**

You may not benefit personally from being in this study. However, we hope that, in the future, other people might benefit from this study because peer mentors and their experience within peer mentor programs for post-secondary students with disabilities will be better understood. The knowledge gained from this study will also benefit others by providing information about peer mentors within a peer mentor program for post-secondary students with disabilities; due to that research about this specific population and type of program is limited.

### **WILL IT COST ME ANYTHING TO BE IN THIS STUDY?**

You will not have any costs for being in this research study.

### **WILL I BE PAID FOR PARTICIPATING?**

You will not be paid for being in this research study.

### **WHO IS FUNDING THE STUDY?**

The University of North Dakota and the research team are receiving no payments from other agencies, organizations, or companies to conduct this research study.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

The records of this study will be kept private to the extent permitted by law. In any report about this study that might be published, you will not be identified. Your study record may be reviewed by Government agencies, the UND Research Development and Compliance office, and the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board.

Any information that is obtained in this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of assigning a pseudonym to each participant to maintain confidentiality. Also to protect the privacy of your interview, names will not be used in the transcribed data. Only the researchers will be knowledgeable to the assigned pseudonyms in order to connect data to specific participants. Transcription and coding of the interviews will take

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place in a private room in the University of North Dakota School of Medicine and Health Sciences or within the private residence of the researchers. The transcription of the interviews will be stored on researchers' personal computers under password-protected files. Once the interviews are transcribed the interview audio recording will be destroyed. If the researchers write a report or article about this study, we will describe the study results in a summarized manner so that you cannot be identified.

Researchers will use audio recording during interviews to collect data. Following interviews, the researchers will transcribe the audio digital record of the interview verbatim. Only researchers and the advisor will have access to the audio recordings through a password protected computer. You will be provided with the transcribed data via email after initial interview to review accuracy. Audio recordings will be deleted following transcription.

#### **IS THIS STUDY VOLUNTARY?**

Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or you may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of North Dakota.

#### **CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS?**

The researchers conducting this study are Carissa Birchem and Mikayla Greely. You may ask any questions you have now. If you later have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research please contact Carissa Birchem at (218) 404-0658 or Mikayla Greely at (763) 516-0861. Further questions, concerns, or complaints can also be directed at the students' advisor, Sarah Nielsen at (701) 777-2208.

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, you may contact The University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board at (701) 777-4279 or [UND.irb@research.UND.edu](mailto:UND.irb@research.UND.edu).

- You may also call this number about any problems, complaints, or concerns you have about this research study.
- You may also call this number if you cannot reach research staff, or you wish to talk with someone who is independent of the research team.
- General information about being a research subject can be found by clicking "Information for Research Participants" on the web site:  
<http://und.edu/research/resources/human-subjects/research-participants.cfm>

**By participating in the interview you are consenting to participate in the study.**

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## Appendix C Recruitment Letter

**Recipient's email:**

**Senders' email:** carissa.birchem@und.edu; mikayla.greely@und.edu

**Subject:** Peer Mentors within the SOAR Program needed for a Qualitative Study

Hello,

Our names are Carissa Birchem and Mikayla Greely and we are two-third year occupational therapy students from the University of North Dakota. Thank you for taking the time to read this email. We are in the process of completing our Independent Study for graduation. We have contacted you because of your affiliation with the SOAR program as a peer mentor.

We are conducting a qualitative phenomenological research study to examine the experience of peer mentors who work with postsecondary students with disabilities, specifically within the SOAR Program. For this study we are looking for individuals who have been a peer mentor for at least one academic semester and individuals who are currently providing peer mentoring services. To complete this study, we will conduct a semi-structured interview utilizing either FaceTime or Skype with the selected peer mentors between the dates of January 23, 2017 – February 13, 2017. The focus of the interviews will be to gain an understanding of what the peer mentor role and experience looks like. The interview will take approximately 60 minutes to complete. In addition to an interview, you will be asked to review the transcribed interview and member check, which will take an additional 30 minutes for each task. Researchers will provide you with the transcribed interview data and the member checking via email.

You have been selected to participate in this study due to your affiliation with the SOAR program as a peer mentor. The Informed Consent is attached as well to this email. If you are willing to participate in our study or would like further information, we ask that you reply to this email by January 20th.

Thank you for your time and consideration,  
We look forward to hearing back from you!

Carissa Birchem, MOTS and Mikayla Greely, MOTS  
Sarah Nielsen, PhD., OTR/L, Faculty & Advisor  
Suzanna Morrison, MSOT, OTR/L, Faculty

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Appendix D  
Analysis of Interview

Meaning Unit <b>R = researcher</b>	Transformation (to language of researcher)	Synthesis, if appropriate
<p><b>1.)</b> R: Tell me about your personal experience as a peer mentor.</p> <p>P2: Ok, so we were introduced to our participant, um probably like 2 weeks into the program just because to get settled and everything. Um, it was I wish there would have been kind of more information because like ok I knew I was getting this participant and I knew his diagnosis.</p>	<p><b>1.)</b> P2 states that she wishes that they received more information at the initiation of the peer mentorship process to get settled into her role.</p>	<p><b>1+2+3+4+48+51+52+61</b> suggest that P2 felt it would have been helpful if they were presented with more information regarding their student's diagnosis and specific strategies for overcoming challenges faced at the initiation of the peer mentorship process. P2 felt that it was hard to determine whether or not she was doing the correct thing with her student, suggesting a lack of structure and support at the beginning of the process. Despite these challenges, P2 indicated that she has had a positive experience being a peer mentor.</p>
<p><b>2.)</b> P2: But, like I haven't had a lot of experience with that population so it was kind of like foreign going into it and then it was kind of like well I'm doing all these things, but am I doing them right.</p>	<p><b>2.)</b> P2 states that she has not had experience with this population before; therefore, she was unsure whether or not she was doing the right thing with her student.</p>	
<p><b>3.)</b> P2: And then like in class it would just or like when we met up and talked about it, it was like yeah you're</p>	<p><b>3.)</b> P2 states that it would have been helpful if she would have received more information pertaining to her student's diagnosis</p>	

<p>doing it right, but you could also be trying this and this so like maybe beforehand like once you do get the diagnosis like have them have you like or somebody like a teacher or maybe somebody who has already been involved in the program, um go over like these are the kinds of things like we can work on, this is how you would approach these types of situations.</p>	<p>addressing various approaches and techniques to use in challenging situations.</p>	
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## Appendix E

### Corresponding Emails

Re: Individual Interview Summary

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

On Mar 11, 2017, at 8:19 AM, Greely, Mikayla <[mikayla.greely@und.edu](mailto:mikayla.greely@und.edu)> wrote:

Hello [REDACTED]

I have attached your individual interview summary, synthesizing the main points that you discussed in your interview. Please look over the summary and respond back to me with any changes or additions you would like to make. Please respond back with these changes or additions by Saturday, March 18th. Thank you for being a part of this research, your participation is greatly appreciated!

- Mikayla Greely

<Individual Interview Study [REDACTED]>

Re: SOAR Interview Transcription

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

On Feb 19, 2017, at 12:11 PM, Greely, Mikayla <mikayla.greely@und.edu> wrote:

Hello [REDACTED]

I have attached your individual interview transcription for you to review and request any changes to be made or the addition of information as you see fit. Please respond with any changes by Sunday, February 26th. If I do not hear back for you by that date, I will assume that there were no changes you would like to make to the transcription.

Thank you again for your participation, I look forward to hearing from you!

- Mikayla Greely

<Interview Transcription [REDACTED]>

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